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# Pirate of the Far East

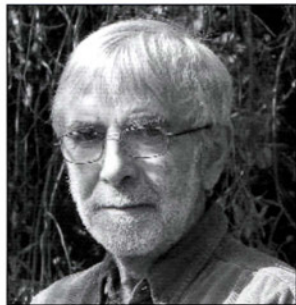
811–1639



Stephen Turnbull • Illustrated by Richard Hook



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## Author's dedication

To my granddaughter, Phoebe Louise Turnbull,  
born 14 February 2007.

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The evil deeds of the pirates of the Far East covered a vast area, so my quest in search of them has taken me on a long journey through Japan, Korea and China, including the outlying islands of Tsushima, Iki, Okinawa and the Goto archipelago that provided their lairs. In China I would like to thank in particular the staff of the National Military Museum, Beijing, the Coastal Defence Museum at Zhenhai near Ningbo, the Dengzhou Naval Headquarters Museum, Penglai, and the Museum of the Home of Qi Jiguang at Penglai. In Japan the Gonoura Historical Museum on Iki, Oyamazumi Shrine on Omishima, the Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of History in Fukuyama, the Murakami Navy Museum on Oshima, the Innoshima Pirate Castle on Innoshima and the Sandanbeki site at Shirahama were very helpful. I also acknowledge the help of the War Memorial Museum in Seoul and the warm welcome I received from the University of the Ryukyus during my Visiting Lectureship to Okinawa and the Yaeyama islands in 2006.





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# PIRATE OF THE FAR EAST

## 811-1639

### INTRODUCTION: THE WORLD OF THE PIRATE

#### Raiders and gentlemen

Over a period of ten centuries the coastal areas of China, Korea and Japan were ravaged by bands of fierce pirates. The name given to them appears in Chinese as *wokou*, and in Korean it is pronounced *waegu*. In each case the first character in the two-ideograph word is the ancient name given by the inhabitants of China and Korea to Japan, which shows clearly where they believed that their tormentors had come from. In many cases the identification was correct, and the name entered the Japanese language as *wako*. But piracy in the Far East was by no means confined to one country of origin, and by the mid-16th century individual pirate bands had acquired a decidedly multinational character. Chinese, Korean and even Portuguese freebooters were involved in massive raids on coastal communities. Some of the most influential pirate leaders were renegade Chinese who based themselves on Japanese islands and sailed from there to terrorize their fellow countrymen under the convenient anonymity of '*wako*' – with a strong emphasis on the character 'Wa'. That is why the present work is called 'Pirate of the Far East' and not simply 'Pirate of Japan'.

A painting in the National Military Museum, Beijing, depicting a battle between Chinese troops and wako. One Chinese soldier holds a sharpened bamboo branch, showing that he is a member of Qi Jiguang's mandarin duck formation.

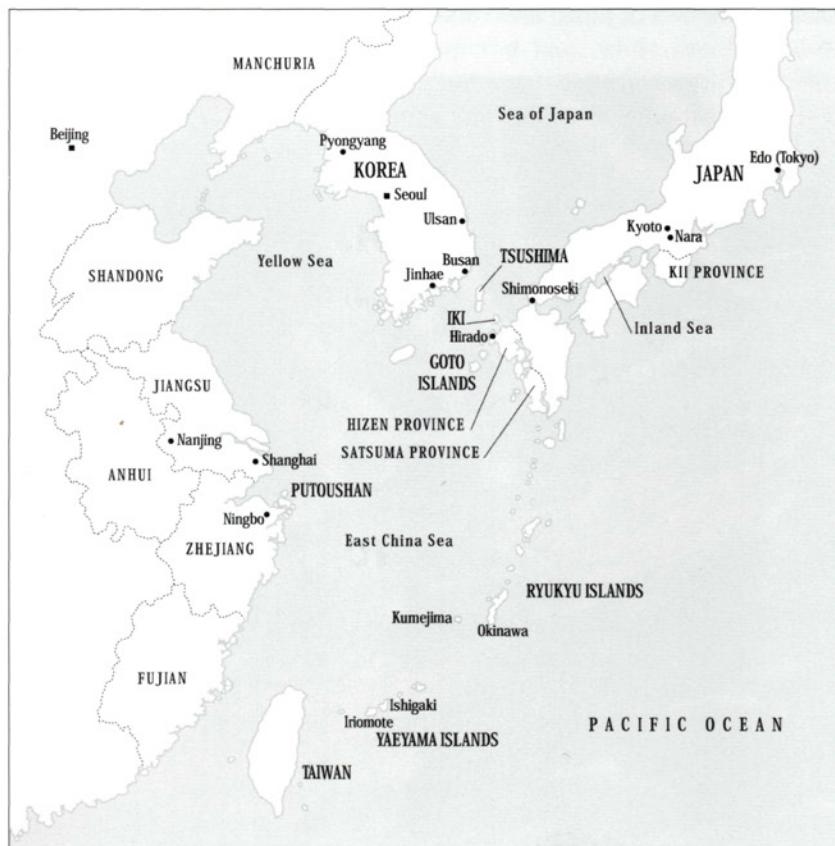




The first use of the expression *wokou* to refer to raiders from 'the country of Wa' appears on a stone tablet erected in AD 414 in southern Manchuria to the memory of the hero King Gwanggaeto of the Goguryeo state of Korea. This was a time when there was considerable military involvement between Japan and Korea's three kingdoms of Baekje, Silla and Goguryeo. Troops frequently came from Japan to fight on the Korean peninsula, and the use of *wokou* on the monument probably refers to Baekje's willing use of Japanese troops in its wars against Goguryeo rather than pirate raids in the later meaning of the term. Several centuries had to pass before the word *wako* was to become associated with ongoing raids arising from uncontrolled aggression that was usually and casually attributed to Japan.

Indeed at that time the prevailing image held by the inhabitants of continental East Asia of the Japanese was a positive one. Japanese armies frequently fought in Korea as the allies of the Baekje kingdom, on whose behalf they suffered a heavy defeat at the battle of the Baekcheon river in 663. Otherwise the only Japanese visitors to China and Korea were cultivated diplomats, earnest students, or disciplined Buddhist monks in search of truth. In 719 the arrival of a group of envoys from Japan to China occasioned the comment that Japan was a 'country of gentlemen, where the people are prosperous and happy and etiquette is carefully observed'.

During the ninth century, in fact, the Japanese tended to be the victims of piracy, not its perpetrators. In 811, 813, 893 and 894 Korean pirates took advantage of the turmoil caused by the break-up of the Unified Silla



Map of China, Japan, Korea and the Ryukyu Islands, showing the main sea areas in which pirates operated.

Kingdom to raid Japan, but eventually suffered heavy casualties and withdrew. Japanese pirates did exist, but their activities were confined to domestic targets. These were the days when the emperors of Japan were beginning to hire local landowners with military skills – the first samurai – to guard the palace in the capital city of Nara and to protect them against rebels and evildoers. The early samurai were frequently called upon to quell pirate raids, either from Korea or from their fellow countrymen. The perpetrators of these domestic outrages were not called wako; there was no confusion over their native origin. Instead they are referred to as *kaizoku*, which literally means ‘sea robbers’ and became the generic term for Japanese pirates operating within Japan.

In 862 an imperial court history noted that pirates in the west of Japan were boldly seizing property, attacking the boats carrying tax rice and committing murder, so orders were sent for their ‘pursuit and apprehension’ in the provinces along the Inland Sea. This stretch of water lies between Japan’s three main islands of Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu and was well suited to illegal seafaring. Hundreds of islands and secluded coves provided shelter for any local fisherman who sought to augment his honest income by preying on the seaborne trade that passed through the narrow straits of Shimonoseki at the Inland Sea’s western extremity on its way to China and Korea. Rich pickings could also be had at its eastern end, where lay the imperial heartlands around Nara and Kyoto, the city that was to become the new capital in 894. In 867 we read of pirates gathering in the strategically located Iyo province on the northern coast of Shikoku to go plundering along the Inland Sea, while other bands operated along the coasts of the Sea of Japan and round the Kii peninsula. In 1114 the Chief

**The Kumano pirate fleet sail out from their cave refuge below the cliffs of Sandanbeki at Shirahama, from a painting hanging in the ‘pirate cave’.**





Priest of Kumano was commissioned to use his 'warrior monks' to pursue and capture the pirates who infested the coastline of Kii province.

The early pirates tended to operate in small groups, and some had links to Korea. They could be bold in their exploits, and in 931 the Court issued orders to guard the roads and rivers that led from Kyoto to the Inland Sea; but little seems to have been achieved because similar orders had to be issued in 932 and 933. The 932 order included the grand-sounding appointment of a *tsuibu kaizoku shi* (envoy for the pursuit and capture of pirates), but he must have been ineffective because in 934 an official granary in Iyo province was attacked and burned. Two years later Iyo was to provide Japan with its first 'pirate king': Fujiwara Sumitomo, whose insurrection is described later.

### **Samurai versus pirates**

The next pirates that the Japanese had to contend with were Jurchens from Manchuria, who were used to raiding Korea. In 1019 Jurchen pirates attacked the Japanese islands of Tsushima and Iki and various areas on the mainland, carrying off hundreds of captives. Their returning fleet was intercepted by Korean ships, and eight Jurchen vessels were captured. The sympathetic Koreans returned 259 Japanese captives to their homes.

Such cooperation between Japan and Korea ensured that for the next two centuries any anti-pirate activities by samurai were directed solely against domestic *kaizoku* raiders, and as the years went by one family in particular – the Taira – grew rich and famous through this form of service to successive emperors. Although their rivals the Fujiwara bred some great warriors, the Taira exerted more influence through their close familial attachments to the imperial line, while the Minamoto family rose to prominence in the north and east of Japan. The Taira made a name for themselves around the Inland Sea from the early 12th century onwards. In 1119 a certain Taira Masamori selected 100 of his most reliable warriors for an expedition, from which he returned at the end of the year with a large number of pirate heads.

Masamori's son Taira Tadamori (1096–1153) continued his father's work. His first expedition began in 1129 when 'the governors feared the strength and bravery [of the pirates] and had no heart for capturing them'. In 1134 a court official noted with relief that one of Tadamori's men had been rewarded for disarming pirates, but this was a year of poor harvests, and poor harvests encouraged piracy. Grain ships going to the capital were being intercepted, so another expedition had to follow in 1135, again led by Taira Tadamori, who returned to Kyoto with 70 captives. However, only 30 of the felons turned out to be real pirates; the others were petty criminals who had been arrested in an attempt to increase Tadamori's reward. He was something of a crafty character, and *Heike Monogatari* (the great literary epic about the Taira clan) begins with a story of his thwarting an assassination attempt by producing a dagger in the imperial court where weapons were strictly forbidden, and then being excused when he demonstrated that it was in fact a dummy weapon. His cunning extended to statecraft, to the extent of forging a decree from the ex-emperor to further his interests in trade with China. As smuggling was part of that trade and the Taira controlled the Inland Sea it is likely that there was considerable understanding between the smugglers and Tadamori's 'coastguards'.

Taira Tadamori was the greatest of the Taira family leaders to make a name from quelling pirates, although his major advancement came from this bizarre incident when he arrested a prowler in the garden of the imperial palace.



Strangely, Taira Tadamori's greatest personal advance occurred not through defeating pirates but because of a bizarre incident when the ex-emperor was alarmed by a ghostly intruder in the palace grounds. Tadamori bravely investigated the alleged goblin, who turned out to be an elderly lamplighter, but the ex-emperor was so grateful that he bestowed upon Tadamori his concubine. She may already have been pregnant when she was handed over, and in 1118 gave birth to Taira Kiyomori, the greatest of all the Taira line. In 1146 Kiyomori became governor of Aki province on the Inland Sea. Seeking profit from trade with China, he organized the dredging of channels around the area of modern Hiroshima. His religious legacy in that part of Japan still stands today as the shrine of Itsukushima on the holy island of Miyajima, where the great *torii* (shrine gateway) appears to float upon the water when the tide comes in.

Taira Kiyomori also used marriage as a means of advancement, and when he died in 1181 he had become an emperor's grandfather. His last words are supposed to have been, 'Place upon my tomb the head of Yoritomo': meaning Minamoto Yoritomo, the leader of the family with whom the Taira were now engaged in the bitter struggle known as the Gempei War. Initially the Tairas' naval expertise stood them in good stead. Twice in 1184, at the battles of Ichinotani and Yashima, they avoided defeat by escaping to their ships, but in 1185 they risked all on a naval battle at Dannoura at the western end of the Inland Sea. Betrayed by their allies and thwarted by the tide, the Taira suffered a cataclysmic defeat, and the destroyers of pirates were themselves destroyed. Minamoto Yoritomo became Japan's first Shogun (military dictator). The government of Japan thus passed from the imperial system to the newly created Shogunate. Japan was to be dominated by the rule of the samurai for 800 years.



## The first wako

Japanese warriors began exporting their wares overseas in the form of pirate raids at the beginning of the 13th century, when Korea became the first country to feel the brunt of the wako. Several factors led to this development. First, Korea was in a sorry state, because the advancing Mongols had been ravaging the north of the country from 1218 onwards. The Mongol invasions denuded the southern coastal area of soldiers, so Korea lay wide open to pillage from the seas. Second, a period of drought and disastrous harvests in western Japan provided the domestic conditions that encouraged raiding, which were exacerbated by the large number of unemployed samurai who had learned to challenge civil authority in a series of wars. Finally, Japan's new central government by the Shogun was now located even farther east in the city of Kamakura, so was less able to control the inhabitants of the little islands and coves in the far west. All these elements combined to produce the first wako raids.

In 1223 gangs of Japanese pirates launched attacks on Korea's southern coast from locations on the northern coast of Kyushu and the islands of Iki and Tsushima. Further raids followed in 1225, 1226 and 1227, and are well documented in both Japanese and Korean sources. One Korean account tells us that in 1225 'two Japanese ships raided the coastal prefectures and subprefectures of Gyeongsang province. Troops were dispatched and captured all [the Japanese].' A Japanese description of the 1226 raid identifies the culprits as members of the *Matsuura-to* (the Matsuura gang), located in the Matsuura area of Hizen province. Their 1226 raid was a much larger affair than that of 1225, because 'several tens of ships' were involved. Pirates from Tsushima acted as their guides and there was much participation by unemployed samurai from elsewhere in Japan. Nevertheless, so fierce was the Korean resistance that the Korean chronicler could write that after 'destroying people and houses and looting valuables... It is said that almost half of them were killed or wounded, and the remainder looted and returned with silver articles and other things'. The Korean navy also intercepted the raiders at sea and two pirates were beheaded, but the others escaped under cover of darkness.



In 1554 the monk Yuekong led 30 Shaolin temple monks against the Japanese pirates and was killed in battle. This life-sized diorama in the Shaolin temple depicts the famous martial artists in action, and in this section we see a Japanese pirate raid. There is a crude attempt to depict Japanese armour, and the statue of the wako once had a sword. Now he stands helpless before the blows of the patriotic monks.

The next wako raid came after a natural disaster had occurred in the Japanese pirate heartlands. A typhoon struck Hizen province in Kyushu in September 1226 and caused devastation to the rice crop of northern Kyushu and the outlying islands. Wako raids on Korea followed in 1227, when, according to Korean sources, defending soldiers 'captured two bandit ships, cut off more than thirty heads and presented the captured weapons'. Some wako were caught in a mountain ambush. The attacks of 1227 led to protests from Korea, to which the authorities on Kyushu responded positively by executing 90 pirates in the presence of Korean envoys.

These executions discouraged piracy for a few years, but drought, famine and more typhoons between 1229 and 1231 caused serious problems in Kyushu, and in desperation some men from Karatsu raided Korea in November 1232. This time the perpetrators were not members of the *Matsuura-to* or seafarers from Tsushima, but subordinates of a prominent local family called the Kusano. They may have thought that this association with a powerful samurai family would spare them from retribution. Indeed, no executions appear to have arisen from the 1232 raid, but the leader of Japan's ruling family, Hojo Yasutoki (1183–1242), nevertheless took a strong line against piracy. This greatly improved Japan's relations with Korea, which was still being attacked by the Mongols, so Japan's non-involvement in its woes was welcomed. A cooperative state of affairs lasted for some time after Yasutoki's death, but in 1251 we read of fortifications being erected in Korea against Japanese pirates, which may imply that raids were expected or had already occurred.

In 1253 the Mongols crossed the Yalu river into Korea again. To compound this misery, a series of famines hit Korea between 1255 and 1259, and in 1259 the wako returned, probably prompted by a similar famine in Japan. More pirate raids occurred in 1263 and 1265, but by then the political situation in Korea had changed dramatically. Mongol control of Korea was sealed in 1273 by a dynastic marriage between the Korean crown prince and a daughter of Khubilai Khan. Korea's considerable naval resources were now at the disposal of the first Yuan (Mongol) emperor of China, as Khubilai Khan became in 1271. It was not long before the Mongols turned their attentions towards Japan, and the pirate families of Tsushima, Iki and Kyushu soon found themselves wielding their swords in self-defence.

Khubilai Khan's first approaches in seeking the subjugation of Japan were diplomatic ones. In 1266 he sent two envoys on a goodwill mission. The men passed through Korea, where officials who had suffered wako raids strongly urged them to abandon any plans to visit Japan and to return to China lest they risk their lives. A further mission was despatched in 1269. After a year the envoy reported back to Khubilai Khan that in his opinion the Japanese were 'cruel and bloodthirsty' and lived in 'a country of thugs'. Japan was certainly projecting a very different image from that of the peaceful Nara Period.

When the Mongols finally invaded Japan in 1274 and 1281 names such as Matsuura feature in the accounts of Japanese resistance, and their experience of wako raids no doubt stood them in good stead. During the second invasion in 1281 attacks were launched on the Mongol fleet by groups of samurai who swam out from the shore, or manoeuvred small boats up against the Mongol ships: all good wako tactics. In one such raid





Kusano Jiro ran his boat alongside a Mongol vessel and lost his left arm in the ensuing fight. By these raids the Mongols were prevented from establishing a beachhead and stayed confined to their ships on the open sea, where the famous typhoon dubbed the *kami kaze* (divine wind) smashed the fleet to matchwood.

**The 1389 raid on Tsushima mounted by Korea against the wako, from a painting in the National War Memorial Museum in Seoul.**

A new phase of wako raiding by Japan against Korea began in 1350. By then the rule of the Hojo family had ended and Japan was again engulfed in civil war between the supporters of rival emperors from the 'Southern Court' and the 'Northern Court'. This breakdown of law and order coincided with a series of natural disasters between 1346 and 1349, and to make matters worse there were still no legitimate outlets for Japanese trade with China, because relations had been curtailed by the Mongol invasions. In 1350 six large wako raids took place on Korea, and for the next 25 years the records show an average of five a year. The peak was reached between 1376 and 1384, when the average rose to over 40 a year, but these raids were no mere pirate raids on coastal towns. As many as 3,000 wako are known to have been involved in some operations. They mainly targeted ships carrying tax rice northwards to the then capital Kaesong (in modern North Korea). When the Koreans moved grain overland instead, the wako headed along both coasts of the Korean peninsula before penetrating deeply inland to attack the storehouses, and even reached the environs of P'yongyang. They also carried off slaves.

The depredations inflicted by the wako on Korea were every bit as serious as the Mongol incursions of a century earlier, and contributed to the eventual collapse of the ruling Goryeo dynasty. The Goryeo military response had actually improved under the direction of Choi Yeong







(1316–88) and Yi Seonggye, who was to found the Joseon dynasty in 1392. Korean cannon helped destroy a large wako fleet at the mouth of the Geum river in 1380, and in 1389 Yi Seonggye ordered a retaliatory raid on Tsushima. A total of 300 wako ships were burned and numerous houses along the shore were set on fire while over 100 Korean prisoners were released.

Thirty years later a further attack on Tsushima was deemed necessary. This raid, known in Japan as the Oei Invasion, is remembered in Tsushima folklore with as much pride as the repulse of the Mongol invasions. The Oei Invasion was very well planned. The Koreans waited until a large wako fleet had left the island for a raid. They resolved to destroy the pirates' bases on Tsushima in their absence and then defeat them when they returned with plunder. A fleet of 200 Korean ships sailed into the bay between the two islands that make up Tsushima and deposited 17,000 soldiers in separate raids. So Sadamori (1385–1452) led the resistance, which involved diplomatic skill as well as military force. In the end Sadamori persuaded the Koreans to withdraw because of the likelihood of approaching typhoons. Mindful of how their ancestors had been forced to suffer from the *kami kaze* on behalf of their Mongol rulers, the invaders pulled back.

The Oei Invasion had nonetheless been a serious warning to Tsushima, and So Sadamori subsequently brought the wako under control, as noted by a fact-finding mission to Japan carried out by the Koreans in 1429: 'If the pirates of the east and west were to join together, there would be no stopping them ... Tsushima is the place where all the pirates gather ... So Sadamori had ordered his people not to let pirates from the west take any water.'

Legitimate trade with Korea reached a peak of harmony with the Kakitsu Treaty of 1443, whereby the head of the So family was permitted to sponsor 50 regular voyages a year to Korea. Because of Tsushima's strategic position as the 'half-way house' between Japan and Korea the So were also made official 'gate keepers' for regulating trade, a role that gave them a unique status among Japanese families.

### Half merchant – half pirate

Not surprisingly, the wako raids of the 14th century did not stop at Korea, and during the 1350s piracy against China began in earnest. Small raids had been carried out on the Ningbo area between 1308 and 1311, but in 1358 the Shandong peninsula was raided in a major attack,

#### PLATE A: WAKO SURRENDER TO KOREANS ON TSUSHIMA, 1389

In 1389 and 1419 the Koreans hit back at the wako by invading the island of Tsushima. This plate shows the aftermath of the successful 1389 raid. The Koreans have burned a shrine to Hachiman, the Japanese god of war, and its smouldering black timbers appear at the rear. In the foreground we see a triumphant Korean general confronting captured wako, who have been surprised on their return home. The appearance of the Koreans is based on costumes, a painting and other material in the National War Memorial Museum, Seoul. The wako are dressed in the manner of the late 14th century. Their leader wears a simple *haramaki* armour over a blue armour robe. One of his followers wears a *hara-ate*, a rudimentary breastplate. In the background is a wako ship. Its appearance is based on the scroll *Jingu Kogo Engi emaki*, painted in 1433, which shows the legendary invasion of Korea by Empress Jingu. The details of the warriors and the ships, however, are of the time when the scroll was painted, so it is more than likely that they served as pirate ships when the occasion demanded. It is powered by oars and two straw mat sails. Its primary role as a fighting ship is shown by the addition to the single cabin on deck of two tall *yagura* (open fighting towers): one in the bow and one in the stern. They resemble the simple wooden towers seen in scrolls of castles of the period, having sloping walls and railings round the top.



**A view of the spectacular Tsushima coastline looking towards the narrow strait that divides the two islands from each other. It was into this natural refuge that the Korean Oei Invasion of 1419 was directed to destroy the wako bases.**

while other bands struck in Jiangsu and the coastal provinces south of the Yangzi delta. Violence was also involved in more legitimate trading pursuits, because to the wako, many of whom were ‘half merchant – half pirate’, piracy was simply trade conducted by other means.

The wako initially had an easy ride in China, because for some years the power of the Yuan dynasty had been in decline and the response to pirates had been as lame as that in Goryeo Korea, but in 1368 China acquired a new ruling dynasty that was able to challenge the wako. Its founder, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–98), first drove the remnants of the Mongol armies to the north of the Gobi Desert and then replaced their Yuan dynasty by a new native Chinese one for which he chose the name Ming. As was customary, the new emperor sent messages to neighbouring countries announcing the change of dynasty. In 1369 his second envoy to Japan carried an imperial letter that spelled out in no uncertain terms the Ming dynasty’s concern over the activities of its turbulent neighbour: ‘Japanese pirates repeatedly plunder areas along the coast, separating men forever from their wives and children and destroying property and lives.’

Japan was offered a stark choice: either to send tribute and declare itself a vassal state of China or to employ military force to ensure that its people stayed within its borders, and: ‘If there are those who nonetheless continue to engage in piracy, I will be compelled to order naval officers to set sail for Japan.’

The first alternative – whereby Japan should become a vassal state of China – was not actually as threatening as it might appear, because East Asian trade during the medieval period was dominated by a bizarre international fiction. China was the largest trading bloc, overshadowing her neighbours partly by size but also because of a strange conceit which stated that China was a universal and benevolent empire whose sovereignty had to be acknowledged by its less fortunate barbarian neighbours before the benefits of commerce could be bestowed. These supplicant barbarians must first pay homage to the Chinese emperor, who would then graciously





bestow upon them titles and privileges such as being acknowledged by China as rulers of their own countries. In deep gratitude they would then bring tribute to his feet, and gifts would be showered upon them in return. This exchange of tribute for gifts contained the essence of trade, and further commercial transactions flowed from it.

Whatever loss of face such a pantomime might entail, most trading missions to China played along with it. According to the first Ming emperor, Japan had entered into such a tributary relationship as early as the Han dynasty (202 BC–AD 220). There had been many vicissitudes and a complete severance of relations following the Mongol invasions, but it was now time to restore harmony, provided that the problem of the wako could be solved.

Unfortunately for China, the situation of civil war in Japan meant that the recipient of the emperor's threat was unable to speak on behalf of the nation as a whole. He was Prince Kanenaga (1329–83), who acted as military commander in the west for the Southern Court. His reaction to the first embassy was to execute the envoys, but in 1371 he despatched ambassadors to China, who went through the motions of offering tribute. It was only when a further embassy from the Ming visited Japan that the Chinese emperor discovered that Kanenaga had been play-acting and had no such authority to offer tribute. Relations deteriorated further when a rebel against the Ming called Hu Weiyong sent Lin Xian, the commander of the garrison at Ningbo, to Japan to request military assistance for a planned coup. A group of 400 samurai went to China in the guise of presenting tribute, but with gunpowder and swords hidden inside large candles. Their mission was to assassinate the Ming emperor, but the plot was discovered. The Chinese ringleaders were executed and all relations with Japan were severed again. As legitimate trade with China was now impossible there was no reason why the wako should continue to maintain their pretence of being 'half merchant – half pirate', and wako raids on China became more rapacious than ever.

**A raid by wako. We see a building in flames, while one wako carries off loot. In the foreground are three fierce-looking wako, two of whom are armed with two swords. No weapon was more feared than the Japanese sword, and a description exists of wako bands as 'multitudes of dancing butchers' knives'. (From the *Wokou tujuan* scroll on display in the Coastal Defence Museum, Zhenhai, Ningbo, by kind permission)**

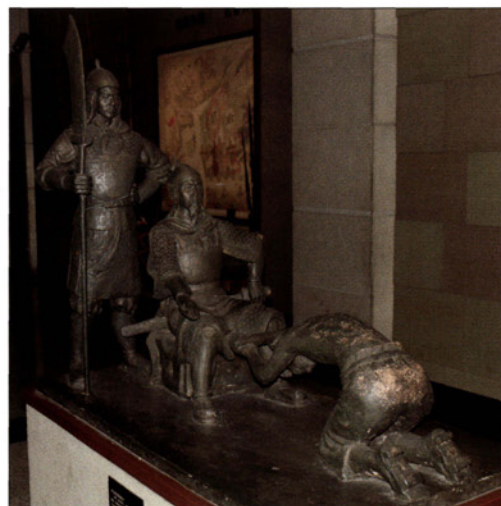
It took a major swing in Japanese domestic affairs to restore harmony once again. In 1392 the Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408) brought about reconciliation between the Northern and Southern courts. The Shogunate now had new authority, and one result of Yoshimitsu's diplomatic efforts was the re-establishment of proper trading relations with China. Pragmatic to the last, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu paid tribute to, and accepted the title of 'King of Japan' from the grateful Ming emperor, so trade flourished once more under the pretence of obeisance. The complex but profitable 'tally' system under which ships were allowed to pass between Japan and China encouraged local lords in Japan to control piracy in their immediate localities, with benefits to all.

This new situation of understanding between Japan and China was echoed in the peaceful, but highly regulated exchange that was now taking place between Japan and Korea through the good offices of the So family of Tsushima. By the end of the 15th century 200 ships a year, sponsored by the Shogun or by powerful clans such as the Ouchi, enjoyed access to Korea. They were allowed to use only three Korean ports: Yompo (now Ulsan on the eastern coast), Naeipo (modern Jinhae) and the major harbour of Busan. The Japanese were also allowed to maintain no more than 60 residential households in these three locations. This was soon flouted, and by 1494 there were 525 households established in substantial independent Japanese enclaves. Their residents paid taxes to the So family rather than to Korea, and as these little 'colonies' were known to be bases for smuggling and small-scale piracy they represented a serious challenge to Korean sovereignty.

The situation might have been controllable had Japan still retained the strong central authority it had enjoyed under 'King' Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. But Japan was by then in turmoil again following the great upheaval known as the Onin War. In 1467 a succession dispute within the Shogunal family had escalated into civil war. The authority of the Shogunate was greatly diminished in favour of a number of competing petty warlords called *daimyo*, who seized territory and defended it with their own loyal samurai. It is not therefore surprising to read that during the 'Sengoku Period' (the 'Age of Warring States', conventionally regarded as lasting from 1467 to 1615) a number of these *daimyo* quickly acquired sea legs, and took to piracy as one means of advancing their interests. In 1506 and 1509 three major pirate raids were launched on the Korean island of Gadeok by Korean-speaking Japanese, while arson attacks took place in Jinhae. In 1510 the Korean Court threatened So Yoshimori that unless he curbed piracy the excess number of households in the three ports would be expelled. When Korean officials tried to enforce the regulations the residents of the three ports rioted and four Japanese were killed. That this was not a spontaneous uprising is shown by the intervention on the same day of a fleet sent from Tsushima which attacked Geoje Island. Korean forces retaliated and 295 Japanese heads were taken. Over the next 50 years relations between Japan and Korea swung between the accommodative and the rapacious, with the So family trying to hold on to its authority and its privileged position. Korean ports were opened up to trade and then abruptly closed again when the Japanese misbehaved. Similarly, permitted ship numbers were increased and then suddenly decreased.



Following a wako raid on Korea in 1544, in 1555 a much bigger operation was launched against the coast of Jeolla province by 70 ships from the Goto islands and Hizen province. Korean resistance all but collapsed. Left waiting for their commander to arrive from Seoul, the Korean troops gave in as soon as the Japanese advanced, and by the time the general arrived he had no army to lead, only runaway soldiers hiding in the forests. The incident was to set a sad precedent, because the sons of these same pirate kings would be back in Korean waters in less than half a century: pirates no longer, but transformed into the loyal and legitimate navies of the Japanese *daimyo*. They would provide the transport, the warships and some of the fiercest fighters for the most awful wako raid of all: Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea.



Lu Tang receives the surrender of the wako, as depicted by a bronze sculpture in the Coastal Defence Museum, Zhenhai, Ningbo.

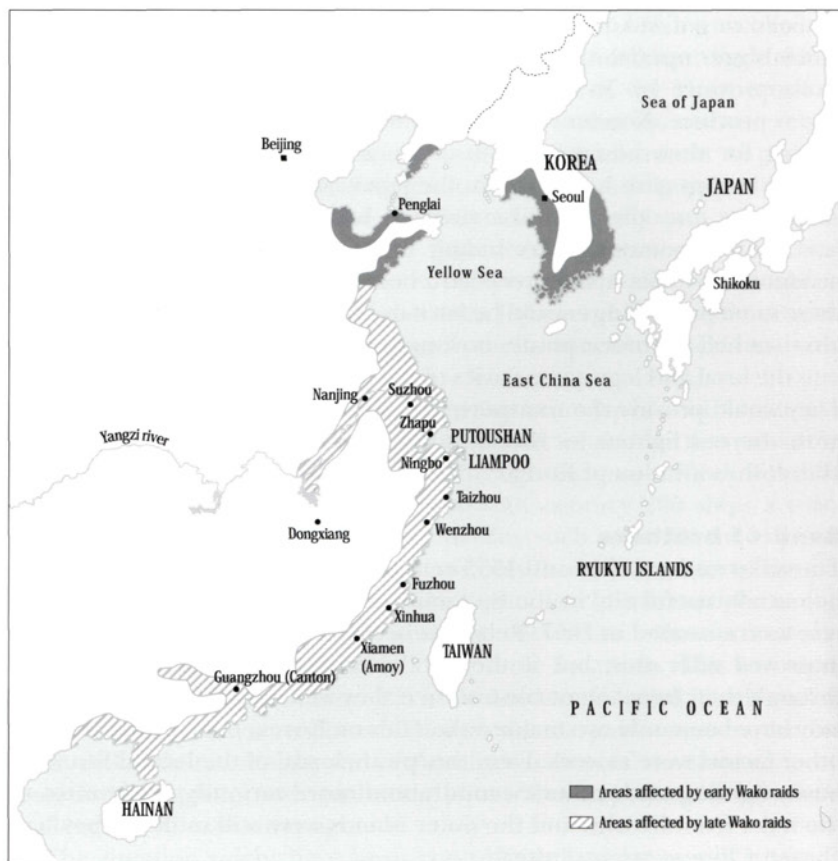
### Band of brothers

The wako raids of 1544 and 1555 reminded the Koreans that they had a potentially useful ally in the So family of Tsushima, whose gate keeper role was reinstated in 1557. Relations between Japan and Korea certainly improved after this, but if the So flattered themselves that this was through their benevolent control then they were much mistaken. There may have been only two major wako raids on Korea, but this was because other factors were at work. First, the 'pirate lords' of the Inland Sea were busily fighting each other. Secondly, and more seriously, while most of the wako from Kyushu and the outer islands were still raiding, they had chosen Chinese targets instead.

It is somewhat paradoxical that at this time raiders from Japan should be violating Chinese territory rather than the reverse. China, which was governed by a highly integrated civil bureaucracy, was much larger in terms of surface area and population, and maintained the contemporary world's largest army. Japan, by contrast, was in a state of anarchy. But this simplistic view hides a complex reality. The all-conquering strength of the Chinese army frequently existed only on paper, and the centralized command often failed to deliver the leadership and direction that was required. The anarchy in Japan also served to create the conditions whereby any *daimyo* who fancied overseas adventures could carry out raids with greater impunity than his ancestors had done for centuries.

Wako raids on China became a serious problem once again after 1548, when a number of disturbing incidents concerned with Japanese 'tribute' missions led the Ming to sever all formal contacts with Japan. In the absence of legitimate trade, piracy and smuggling rushed to fill the vacuum. From 1440 to 1550 there had been only 25 *wokou* raids on China, but between 1551 and 1560 the number shot up to 467. Pirate attacks on China were also different in composition, because although most of the raiding fleets sailed from Japanese ports many of the perpetrators, including the most notorious pirate chiefs, were now Chinese. The official history of the Ming dynasty states that in the great wako raid on China of 1555 'about three in ten were real Japanese, and seven of ten were persons who subordinated themselves to the Japanese'. A contemporary account in a letter by Mao Kun (1512–1601) of about the same year confirms that such Chinese involvement in wako activities was no means atypical:

**Map showing the 16th-century wako raids on China and Korea.**



Recently I have heard about a man of my village who was captured by the pirates at Kunshan and stayed with the pirates for fifty days before he came out. When he returned he talked about the pirates. In general, each ship has about two hundred men. The leaders and followers are all from Fujian and our Wenzhou, Taizhou and Ningbo... Those who are so-called Wo and who knot their hair in a bun are only a score or so in number. From this we can understand that the pirates only use Wo as their name but that in fact they are people of our land.

It was a situation that radically changed the definition of 'wako'. The position in Japan, where independent warlords ruled the roost from mountain fortresses on land and island fortresses on the seas, promised friendly havens for any renegade Chinese adventurer who desired to build up his own overseas empire and conceal it under the useful term of 'wako'. The advantages were obvious: he became anonymous and Japan got the blame! For example, Wang Zhi – the self-styled 'King of the Wako' – was based first on the Japanese island of Hirado and then on the Goto archipelago, while Chen Dong had close connections with the Shimazu family of Satsuma, where the notorious Xu Hai also had a base.

How could the Chinese have allowed this to happen? Partly it stemmed from the blinkered attitude of the later Ming emperors, who cherished their ancient role as the centre of the universe to such an extent that they frequently banned trade with their neighbours and discouraged overseas



voyages by native Chinese. The same mentality bedevilled relations on China's northern frontier. Whenever trade was cut off, the nomads of the north took matters into their own hands. China's northern neighbours needed either to trade or to raid, and when raiding was seen to be easier than trading the boundaries between the two became blurred. The Mings' inability either to destroy or to pacify nomadic raiders led eventually to the creation of the Great Wall of China. Far to the south, where the wako were the first people to provide a threat to China's security from non-contiguous territory, a similar 'Great Wall of the Sea' may be discerned in the line of fortress towns, beacons and watchtowers that was established along the Chinese coast from Korea to Vietnam.

Chinese pirates could easily be disguised as Japanese, but physical appearance, if nothing else, prevented the other main pirates in China from being incorrectly labelled 'Japanese raiders'. Their numbers included the Portuguese, who in 1511 had conquered Malacca: a place used frequently by Chinese merchants. By 1513 Portuguese traders were seeking markets in China itself. They were granted concessions in Guangdong, but lost them in 1523 owing to the piracy practised by their own ambassador! Portuguese piracy flourished from then onwards, and by the 1540s Portuguese freebooters were firmly ensconced on one of the hundreds of islands of the Zhousan group off Ningbo that promised refuge for pirates. The Portuguese called their base Liampoo, where, according to a Dominican friar, 'they were so firmly settled and with such freedom that nothing was lacking them save having a gallows'. The island was actually run by two notorious Chinese pirates, the Xu brothers, whose chief lieutenant Wang Zhi travelled regularly to his base in Japan to recruit more followers.

The diplomatic incidents of 1548 that led to a severance of official relations with Japan coincided with a successful drive by the Ming to clean out Liampoo; but the operation, led by the enthusiastic governor of Zhejiang province Zhu Wan (1494–1550), was almost too successful. The Ming emperor had already deprived the Chinese people of their right to trade legally with Japan, and now Zhu Wan had destroyed the only base through which it might have been carried on illegally with some semblance of order. With Liampoo gone, suspect Chinese entrepreneurs had to transform themselves from mafia bosses into more mobile organizations. They hired Japanese swordsmen as private armies, smuggled goods on a grand scale, and developed more overseas bases in Japan. It is from this time that we may date the large-scale development of the Chinese 'wako bosses' and their international followers in bases on the Japanese islands, but this is not to suggest that the Japanese played an insignificant role in wako activities. There are enough genuinely Japanese names in the records to disprove this. Recruitment was also spread widely through Kyushu, Shikoku and the whole of western Honshu.

**A large jar and strings of cash that were the loot from wako raids are displayed here in the History Museum in Gonoura on the island of Iki.**







An old map of the Ningbo area, showing the 'Great Wall of the Sea' that was established to keep the wako away from the myriad tiny islands that provided such excellent bases. The fortified city of Ningbo itself is shown in the lower left at the confluence of the rivers that flow to the sea next to the island of Jintang and the major island of Zhousan. (Coastal Defence Museum, Zhenhai, Ningbo)

The bizarre modern statue commemorating the wako on Fukue Island, part of the Goto island group, Nagasaki Prefecture. This is the only sculpture in the whole of Japan of wako, who often appear to be something of an embarrassment to official historians.



For two decades these international 'bands of brothers' sailed under the name of wako and conducted operations against China and, to a lesser extent, against Korea. There were some military successes against them, most notably in 1556 when the governor of Zhejiang, Hu Dongxian, contrived to make Xu Hai betray his colleagues and then destroyed Xu Hai himself. In the following year Hu lured 'public enemy number one' Wang Zhi back to China with the promise of a pardon and had him beheaded instead.

Direct Japanese involvement in piracy subsided a little following the destruction of these renegades and the subsequent shift of operations farther to the south, which placed wako activities just out of range of Japan. Finally, in 1567 the Ming government rescinded its prohibition on trade overseas. This took much of the wind out of the illegal sails, although the ban was still enforced upon the Japanese, whose reputation was so bad anyway that the newly legitimate traders simply refused to have anything to do with them now that legal contacts were available. Their place was taken, by and large, by the Portuguese.

### From sea dogs to sea lords

Meanwhile domestic piracy continued within Japan under the auspices of the 16th-century version of the *kaizoku*. In much the same way that landlocked *daimyo* established their territories by the thoroughly respectable business of stealing land and building castles on it, so the more astute families of Kyushu and the Inland Sea entered the new Japanese aristocracy through naval warfare.

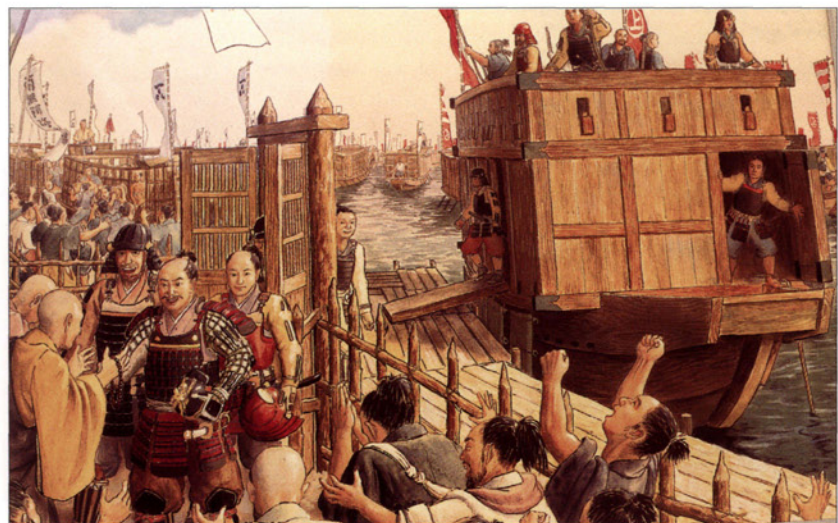
Just as in the days of Fujiwara Sumitomo, the numerous islands and inlets of the Inland Sea provided excellent pirates' lairs. The most famous family associated with the 'pirate kings' was Murakami, of whom there were three active branches based on the islands of Noshima, Kurushima and Innoshima. Several *daimyo* courted their services, because only the most completely landlocked warlord felt that he could do without a navy.





A waxworks display in the Innoshima Pirate Castle depicting Murakami Yoshimitsu of the Innoshima branch of the Murakami, planning an operation with his followers.

In 1555 the Mori family of Hiroshima, who were allied to the Murakami, rose to power by their victory at the battle of Miyajima, an amphibious operation that confirmed them as the rising naval stars in the Inland Sea. The Murakami navy then fought on the Mori side against the most powerful *daimyo* in Japan: Oda Nobunaga (1534–82), who had defeated a series of rivals to control central Japan. The Mori came into direct conflict with Nobunaga when they began supporting his deadliest enemies: the Buddhist ‘peoples’ army’ of the Ikko-ikki in the fortified cathedral of Ishiyama Honganji, where Osaka castle now stands. This location gave the Ikko-ikki a direct outlet to the Inland Sea, and the Mori kept them supplied by this route over their decade-long war with Nobunaga. Two sea battles (the battles of Kizugawaguchi) were fought in Osaka bay in 1576 and 1578 between Nobunaga and the Murakami navy. After the defeat of the Ikko-ikki in 1580 the Murakami withdrew to their islands and coves, and were finally brought under control by the large-scale invasions of Shikoku (1585) and Kyushu (1587) led by Nobunaga’s successor Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98). These huge operations saw ships being used for transporting large numbers of samurai between the islands, after which the erstwhile pirates’ bases were destroyed from the land.



In this painting from the Noshima Murakami Navy Museum in Miyakubo we see a priest of the Jodo Shinshu sect bless the Murakami fleet as it prepares to set out to meet Oda Nobunaga’s navy in the first battle of Kizugawaguchi in 1576.







The reunification of Japan by Hideyoshi in 1591 inevitably took in the pirates. The process began in 1588 when Hideyoshi enacted the first of two important ordinances, namely the famous 'Sword Hunt', by which all weapons were to be confiscated from the peasantry and placed in the hands of the loyal *daimyo* and their increasingly professional armies. Another edict issued on the same day was aimed directly at the pirates. In their case the local representatives of the *daimyo* were looking not specifically for weapons but for written oaths that no seafarer would engage in piracy. If any *daimyo* should fail to comply with the order and allow pirates to stay and practise their craft, then his fief would be confiscated. The Sword Hunts were followed by the Separation Edict of 1591, which formally divided the samurai class from the rest of society. The edict did not explicitly mention seafarers, but its intentions towards them were nonetheless clear. The peasants had been disarmed, and there was now to be a total separation between the military function and the productive (i.e. agricultural) function, whether for growing rice or catching fish. As the Englishman Samuel Purchas was to put it in his *Pilgrimes*, 'Taico had settled peace thorow all Japan from warres, from Robbers by land, and from Rovers by sea, which before continually infested all with piracies.'

In 1592, within a year of this momentous reform of Japanese society, Hideyoshi launched the invasion of Korea. The main burden of supplying troops fell upon the *daimyo* whose lands were nearest to the peninsula, so the ex-wako of Kyushu soon had the pleasant surprise of being commanded to carry out what amounted to a pirate raid with official government blessing. They responded with suitable loyalty and attacked Korea with great ferocity. No chronicles record their movements in this war of rape, raiding and pillage which so resembled the wako depredations of yore, and it is only from the Korean records that we know anything of their activities. The only prominent *daimyo* known to have taken part in the depredations were the Kurushima brothers from the Murakami family and Kamei Korenori, all of whom had wako pedigrees. They may now have been called *suigun* (navies) rather than *kaizoku*, but to the people of Korea they were like terrible ghosts from the past: a renewed flowering of the dark curse of the wako.

The samurai returned from the war in Korea at the end of 1598 to enter a different conflict, out of which the Tokugawa family emerged triumphant with the victory of Sekigahara in 1600. Many samurai were dispossessed by the defeat of their masters and became unemployed

#### PLATE B: KAIZOKU OF THE MURAKAMI NAVY WITH FULL EQUIPMENT FOR SEA FIGHTING, 1576

This plate shows the *kaizoku* pirates of the Murakami navy at the height of their powers when they were in action against Oda Nobunaga at the first battle of Kizugawaguchi in 1576. They are more substantially dressed and armed than the wako who raid China and Korea. Their bodies are protected by simple *okegawa-do*-style armours as worn by the *ashigaru* (footsoldiers). The *mon* (family badge) of the Murakami is lacquered on to the breastplates and they also wear simple shirts and trousers, bare feet in straw sandals, although the energetic bomb hurlers have stripped right down. They are flinging *horoku*, which consisted of two iron hemispheres fastened together and wrapped round with layers of *washi* (Japanese paper) glued on to the outside surface. Gunpowder and numerous iron shards were held inside, reached by a fuse timed by its length, while a rope or cord was attached to the outside for throwing in the manner of an Olympic hammer thrower. The weapons used by their comrades include arquebuses and bows, together with the 'sleeve entangler', associated with the police of the Edo Period; a mass of spikes constituted the head of this polearm, and about 20cm (8in.) of its upper shaft was also covered with spikes.





Three great heroes of the war against the wako are shown here in a wall painting in the Coastal Defence Museum at Zhenhai, Ningbo. They are Qi Jiguang, Yu Dayou and Lu Tang.

*ronin*, or 'men of the waves'. Many would have been 'men of the waves' in a more literal sense when they turned to piracy once again to augment their paltry incomes. But China and Korea were no longer the sole targets. Instead the new wako spread their nets wider, taking in South East Asia and the Spice Islands of the Indonesian archipelago. As Japanese overseas activities increased, the inhabitants of the coasts of Siam, Cambodia and Vietnam became increasingly alarmed. By 1605 the Spanish governor of the Philippines was expressing his fears about a possible Japanese invasion, and in December of that year a certain John Davis became the first Englishman ever to be killed by a Japanese when his ship was involved in a fight with wako.

Yet the story of the wako was to come to an abrupt end in 1639 through a development that was none of their doing. The ruling Tokugawa Shogunate had been concerned for some time about the influence of European traders and missionaries on Japan, and following the Shimabara Rebellion of 1638, which had a strongly Christian element to it, all contacts with Catholic Europe were cut off by the Sakoku (Closed Country) Edict. Apart from some very restricted trade with China and Korea, no foreign ships were allowed to land, and Japanese people were forbidden to sail overseas lest they lose their heads on their return. The days of the wako were over.



# CHRONOLOGY

- 811 Korean pirates attack Japan.
- 862 Japanese pirates active in the Inland Sea.
- 932 Creation of 'pirate queller' post.
- 936 Revolt of Fujiwara Sumitomo begins.
- 941 Death of Fujiwara Sumitomo.
- 1019 Jurchen pirates attack Tsushima and Iki.
- 1114 Warrior monks fight Kumano pirates.
- 1129 Taira Tadamori fights pirates in the Inland Sea.
- 1146 Taira Kiyomori becomes governor of Aki province.
- 1185 Battle of Dannoura.
- 1223 First wako raid on Korea.
- 1274 First Mongol invasion of Japan.
- 1281 Second Mongol invasion of Japan.
- 1350 Wako raiding on Korea recommences.
- 1358 Wako raids on Shandong province of China.
- 1368 Founding of Ming dynasty.
- 1376 Dengzhou (Penglai) Water Fortress built in China.
- 1380 Wako fleet destroyed by cannon fire.
- 1389 Koreans attack Tsushima.
- 1392 Ashikaga Yoshimitsu reconciles the Northern and Southern courts.
- 1405 Wako publicly executed by boiling alive.
- 1419 Koreans launch 'Oei Invasion' of Tsushima.
- 1443 Kakitsu Treaty.
- 1467 Onin War begins.
- 1523 Armed clashes between rival Japanese at Ningbo.
- 1544 Chinese pirate Wang Zhi joins the Japanese.
- 1548 Arquebuses first used by wako.
- 1553 Yu Dayou defeats wako at Putoushan.
- 1555 Qi Jiguang appointed to fight pirates in China.
- 1556 Wako raid on China led by Xu Hai.
- 1557 Death of Wang Zhi.
- 1567 Qi Jiguang overcomes wako and Chinese ban on foreign trade is lifted.
- 1576 First battle of Kizugawaguchi.
- 1578 Second battle of Kizugawaguchi.
- 1585 Invasion of Shikoku.
- 1588 Hideyoshi's Sword Hunt.
- 1592 First Invasion of Korea; death of Kurushima Michiyuki.
- 1597 Second Invasion of Korea; death of Kurushima Michifusa.
- 1600 Battle of Sekigahara.
- 1605 English ship *Tiger* encounters wako.
- 1639 Sakoku Edict.



A Chinese woodcut depicting a wako in the company of demons, which shows clearly the perception the Chinese had of the wako. The pirate is naked except for a loincloth and carries a sword. From *Xuefu quanbian* (Ming dynasty).

## PORTRAIT OF A PIRATE

### Appearance and costume

So extensive were the wako raids that there is no shortage of descriptions of pirates in Chinese literature, where the accounts are generally very uncomplimentary. Perhaps the mildest comment comes from *Riben zhuan* (Treatise on Japan), which is contained within the *Ming shi* (History of the Ming Dynasty). It was written at a time before there was considerable Chinese involvement with the wako, and refers particularly to the Japanese predilection to be either merchant or pirate as it suited:

The Japanese are by nature cunning. They often transport local Japanese products and weapons on their ships. They appear, then

disappear along the coast. Given the opportunity, they take out their weapons and wantonly plunder. Otherwise they present their local products as tribute.

This behaviour was noted by a Ming commentator in 1468, which led him to describe the Japanese as 'treacherous and deceitful'. Their depredations were regarded as far more serious than those in the north of China by nomad raiders. Nor could the pirates be easily quelled by negotiation, as the Mongols often were: '... the Japanese alone resist. The more we use force against them, the more disobedient they become. The more we appease them, the more rebellious they become.'

No less a person than the first Ming emperor depicted the Japanese pirates as a bunch of petty thieves 'with shorn hair and mottled cloths', ruled by 'barefoot rulers and ministers' and speaking 'a language that sounds like the croaking of frogs'. Similar comments were made a century and a half later by Zheng Mao, who wrote about a raid by wako on Zhapu in the summer of 1554. They were 'bald and made bird-like sounds... They wore mottled green and white clothing.' In *Riben kao*, Ye Xianggao paints a description of toughness: 'The men go hatless and their hair is dishevelled. They have branded faces and tattooed bodies.'

There is remarkable pictorial confirmation of these descriptions in the form of two contemporary painted scrolls, each of which bears the name *Wokou tujian* (Illustrated Scroll of the Wako). The first scroll, 32cm (12½in.) wide and 522cm (205½in.) long, is now owned by Tokyo University. A similar scroll, owned by the National Museum of Chinese History in Beijing, is on display in the Coastal Defence Museum in Ningbo. This may simply be a different version of the scroll in Tokyo as it bears the same name, although it was clearly painted by a different artist. The Tokyo version must have been created some time after 1548, as the wako armoury includes arquebuses (matchlock muskets). The story of the raid is told from right to left. It begins with the wako disembarking, and continues to show them looting and setting fire to buildings using pine torches. One pirate even appears to be uprooting a tree! At the far left of the scroll civilians flee in terror while the Ming soldiers launch a counterattack. On the Ningbo scroll we see similar depictions of the raid, which ends with the wako being taken captive.

Most of the wako on both scrolls are very lightly clad, which would have been the most suitable attire for rapid raiding where surprise and the efficacy of their swords would have provided the main means of operation. They have bare legs and feet, and wear white loincloths beneath their loose jackets, which are fastened at the breast using ties sewn into the seams. The wako captives on the Ningbo scroll have been stripped to their loincloths. Their arms are tied securely behind their backs using complex knots, and one felon sports a white flag flying from his bonds.

Some wako have their jackets tied in at the waist with a belt. The jackets appear to be coarsely woven with simple dyed patterns, which may be the simple floral designs noted in some written sources. The 'baldness' referred to in the Ming accounts is depicted, and is accounted for by the Japanese fashion for shaving the front of the head and tying the remaining hair back in a pigtail. They all seem to have droopy moustaches and some form of beard, while their squat faces are deliberately painted to look repulsive.





One man appears to be directing operations or simply urging the others on with a signalling fan held in his left hand, while another pirate announces their arrival by blowing on a *horagai* (conch shell trumpet). Only one wako in the raiding party is wearing armour. He is acting in the role of a standard bearer and is carrying a long banner on the end of a long pole. Unlike his comrades, the standard bearer is wearing a suit of Japanese armour complete with shoulder plates, although there is no sleeve armour or any protection for the legs. He does, however, wear a helmet with a red sun's disc *maedate* (helmet crest) and golden *kuwagata* ('antlers'). He holds his sword in his left hand, but his right hand is occupied with the flag he is carrying – hence his need for armour for his personal defence. Other flags are visible, but they are triangular and resemble Chinese flags. Only one other pirate is not bare headed; he is an archer who is wearing a straw hat. One comical vignette on the Ningbo scroll is the sight of one pirate standing on another's shoulders to look into the distance.

### Equipment, arms and armour

The difference in weaponry between the nomads of the north and the pirates of the south was noted by Ming dynasty commanders who had to deal with both threats: 'The Japanese especially revere swords and firearms, while the Mongols especially value equestrian skills and archery.' Mounted archery, skill in which was the badge of the early samurai, would have been impossible in seaborne raids, so the wako, even those wealthy enough to afford horses, fought on foot. There is, however, evidence that horses were taken on some raids, particularly the larger ones of the

**A wako raid is launched from a commandeered Chinese boat. Several of the wako are almost naked, and are armed with spears, swords and bows. One has a flag made in the Chinese style, which may betray their actual ethnic origin. (From the *Wokou tujuan* scroll on display in the Coastal Defence Museum, Zhenhai, Ningbo, by kind permission)**



A wako raid from a modern copy of the *Wokou tujuan* scroll in Tokyo owned by the History Museum in Gonoura on the island of Iki. The lightly clad wako with their naked blades are clearly shown. The spears are very long, while the two wako in the water have probably not fallen overboard, but will swim up to the Ming ship with which the wako are in combat. Such techniques were greatly feared by the Chinese.



16th century when deep forays were made into Korean and Chinese territory. Bows and arrows would still have been seen in plenty, but swords, *yari* (long straight-bladed spears) and the curved-bladed polearms called *naginata* were the weapons of choice in the situation of a raid.

The Tokyo version of the wako scroll clearly illustrates that during a pirate attack most wako carried just one weapon: a sword, a spear, a *naginata*, a bow or a gun. One pirate is carrying a Chinese-style trident, and one has a sword in each hand. The swords have all been drawn and no scabbards are visible, which implies that the scabbards were left on board ship for convenience in a rapid raid. No pirate weapon was more feared or respected than the samurai sword. Zheng Sixiao noted that 'their swords are extremely sharp'. Huang Zhencheng (1287–1362) described the Japanese as 'a multitude of dancing butchers' knives that randomly appear and disappear and as monsters that appear to be flying when they walk'. The depiction of Japanese weaponry on the Ningbo scroll is slightly different. The wako are shown wearing two swords, but thrust through the belt on opposite sides of the body, contrary to the usual Japanese style. Two wako are wielding one drawn sword in each hand.

The wako archers wear quivers. Unlike the common Japanese practice where the quiver was tied around the waist and the arrows withdrawn by pulling the arrowhead downwards, the quivers are slung over the right shoulder, which makes them look more like western quivers. One wako has

#### PLATE C: A WAKO BAND IN CHINA, 1548

This plate shows certain key individuals in a band of wako raiding China in 1548, and is taken from the Tokyo version of the *Wokou tujuan*. Their legs and feet are bare, and white loincloths would be worn beneath their loose jackets, which are fastened at the breast using ties sewn into the seams. The jackets are coarsely woven with simple dyed patterns. One is an archer, with a rough quiver. One has an arquebus, and is making use of it for the first recorded time in Japanese history. He has lost an eye in action, and has covered up the socket with an eye-patch. The inclusion of this perhaps anachronistic detail is justified by the historical record of the wearing of an eye-patch by the great one-eyed Japanese *daimyo* Date Masamune (1566–1636) and, of course, by the well-known fact that all one-eyed pirates wore eye-patches! In the foreground is their standard bearer, who is wearing a suit of Japanese armour complete with shoulder plates, although there is no sleeve armour or any protection for his legs. He does however wear a helmet with a red sun's disc *maedate* (helmet crest) and golden *kuwagata* ('antlers'). He is holding his sword in his left hand, but as his right hand is occupied with the flag he is carrying, his personal need for defence explains the presence of the suit of armour. His flag is Chinese in appearance, as are all the wako flags on the illustrated scrolls.







his quiver dangling downwards. Firearms in the form of arquebuses were introduced to Japan by the Portuguese in 1543. The wako anticipated their more law-abiding countrymen by one year in their use of firearms in battle, when they employed guns in a pirate raid on China in 1548, as recorded by the great Chinese general Qi Jiguang (1528–88), who made his name fighting wako before being transferred to the northern frontier to build the Great Wall.

One thing we do know about the appearance of the wako is that they tended to fight under the flag of Hachiman Daibosatsu. Hachiman is the deified spirit of Emperor Ojin who lived between AD 201 and 310 according to the traditional reckoning. When his mother Empress Jingu carried out her own legendary invasion of Korea she was pregnant with the future emperor and put a stone in her sash to delay his birth. Hachiman, as Japan's primary 'god of war' was therefore a very suitable *kami* (deity) to invoke to protect an invasion. His name, with the title 'Daibosatsu' (the great *bodhissatva* – a holy person who holds back from Enlightenment until all human souls are saved), would be written on the wako flags, or alternatively a *mon* (crest) of three *tomoe* (comma shapes) in a circular pattern would act as his symbol. Curiously, the Hachiman flag does not actually appear on either scroll, where the flags are all of a Chinese style. This may indicate that the artists were trying to stress the wako gangs' international make-up.

The *kaizoku* who operated in the Inland Sea during the 16th century would have been more substantially dressed and armed than those who raided China and Korea. Short voyages and friendly ports meant that heavier weapons and armour could be used, and when a *daimyo* sent a

2

A group of wako from the modern copy of the *Wokou tujuan* scroll owned by the History Museum in Gonoura on the island of Iki. Their patterned jackets are clearly shown. One is armed with an arquebus, while another is an archer. Note how lightly armed they are for their raid.





fleet against his enemies there was every chance that his opponents would be equipped with the latest weaponry, so measures were taken accordingly. One authority recommends that for fighting in a boat, the samurai should wear only a *do* (body armour) and helmet, discarding facemask, sleeves, shinguards and thighguards. The identifying *sashimono* (back flag) would also be inconvenient, so this should be replaced with a small *sode-jirushi* (shoulder-flag).

A ship's commander would have worn an elaborate suit of armour, but for the ordinary sailors the simple *okegawa-do*-style of suit of armour as worn on land by the *ashigaru* (footsoldiers) provided good protection for the most vulnerable parts of the body. It consisted of a small number of armour plates riveted together and lacquered over to give a smooth surface. A row of skirt pieces hung down around the groin and upper thigh. It would be worn over a simple shirt and trousers, leaving bare arms and bare feet in straw sandals. In hot weather at sea the shirt might be omitted.

In addition to bows, guns, swords and spears we note the use of various grappling weapons fitted with hooks and barbed spikes. The *kusari kagi*, or grappling chain, consisted of four hooks joined together (somewhat like the traditional Japanese anchor) on the end of a chain 2m (6½ft) long. The chain was attached to a rope about 15m (49ft) long. The whole was swung around the head and flung on to the enemy ship's deck. A variety of this weapon used a short chain attached to a pole. The main defence against the *kusari kagi* was the *kama*, which had a sickle-like blade attached to a polearm 3m (nearly 10ft) in length. With the blade of the *kama* a pirate could hack at grappling ropes or chains from a distance. A variation on it consisted of a spear with a long blade and two cross blades pointing down towards the shaft like two sickles. This combined the use of the *yari* with the *kama*. Another polearm had three straight spikes barbed like fish-hooks. The *kumade*, a polearm with a 'bear's paw' of spikes, and the *kumode*, a similar device but bristling with spikes, provided two useful varieties of grappling iron. Both were mounted on long shafts. Finally we may note the 'sleeve entangler', usually associated with the police of the Edo Period. A mass of spikes constituted its head, and about 20cm (8in.) of the upper shaft was also covered with spikes.

In the accounts of *kaizoku* operations in the Inland Sea we also read of the use of *bo hiya* (fire arrows), which had a burning element fixed to the arrowhead. The incendiary material on the fire arrows was made from rope that had been waterproofed by boiling it in a mixture of water, the ashes of burnt cedar leaves, and a certain iron substance, all wrapped in paper with a fuse. As an alternative to bows as a means of propulsion the Japanese developed a wide-bore arquebus that fired rocket-like wooden fire arrows with leather wings. During one sea battle involving Kobayakawa Takakage we read of *bo hiya* 'falling like rain'.

Another weapon introduced to sea-fighting by the Murakami navy was an exploding bomb called the *horoku*, which literally means 'earthenware pot', though it was made from iron and not ceramic material. The *horoku* consisted of two iron hemispheres fastened together and wrapped round with layers of *washi* (Japanese paper, glued on to the outside surface. Inside was some gunpowder and numerous iron shards. A fuse timed by its length ran into the interior, and a rope or cord was attached to the outside for throwing. *Horoku* resembled the Chinese *zhen tian lei* which were thrown by catapult and had been used as early as the Mongol



The 'pirate king' Murakami Takeyoshi (1533–1604), who ruled the Inland Sea from his castle on the island of Noshima. This waxwork in the Pirate Castle on Innoshima shows Takeyoshi wearing his famous helmet with a shell-shaped *maedate* (helmet crest).

invasion of 1274. The Japanese *horoku*, however, were thrown by hand; they were whirled round the head on a rope in a technique reminiscent of an Olympic hammer thrower. Their purpose appears to have been twofold: as an anti-personnel weapon and as an incendiary device against wooden ships. In this latter role the Murakami navy scored a hit against the ship commanded by Sakuma Uemon during the first battle of Kizugawaguchi in 1576. His ship was set on fire by *horoku* and many men were killed.

### The pirate ship

No ships built in medieval Japan have survived, but there are enough illustrations in contemporary paintings to enable historians to reconstruct the probable appearance of the ships that the *wako* would have used. During the early centuries of pirate activity within Japan the ships used for fighting were the same vessels used at other times for fishing and transport. They varied considerably in size. Smaller craft would have sufficed for operations in Japanese waters, while larger ones made the journey to the Asian mainland. The ships used by Fujiwara Sumitomo and his henchmen would have resembled the one depicted on a historical picture scroll owned by the Kitano Tenjin shrine, which has provided the information for a model on show in the Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of History in Fukuyama. The ship had a straw mat sail, but oar propulsion could also be used. It had a

carrying capacity of 150 *koku*. The *koku* was a measure of volume of rice (180 litres, 39½ gallons) that was also used to express the wealth of rice fields. One *koku* was supposed to be the amount of rice necessary to feed a man for one year.

During the 13th century we may safely envisage pirate raids being carried out in Japanese coastal waters by ships identical to those that were to be employed during the 'hit and run' raids against the Mongol invaders, as shown on the Mongol Invasion Scroll, painted about 1280 to show the exploits of one of the samurai who fought the Mongols. They were small and manoeuvrable; a sail could be raised, but they were usually powered by oars and had one small cabin at the rear. The fighting men would stand on the deck, and from a description of the fighting against the Mongols we know that the mast could be dropped down to provide a bridge for boarding an enemy vessel.

A valuable Japanese painted scroll of the early 15th century depicts an actual warship of the time. The scroll, the *Jingu Kogo Engi emaki*, was painted in 1433, and shows the legendary invasion of Korea by Empress Jingu. The details of the warriors and the ships, however, are of the time when the scroll was painted. The ship on the Jingu scroll is of 400 *koku*, and is powered by oars and straw mat sails. Its primary role as a fighting ship is shown by the addition to the single cabin on deck of two tall *yagura* (open fighting towers): one in the bow and one in the stern. They resemble the simple wooden towers seen in scrolls of castles of the





period. Up on deck are a number of samurai, fully armoured with bows and arrows. Such vessels would certainly have been seen on pirate raids.

Although this ship was designed for fighting, from the 15th century onwards some pirate raids involved the transport of vast quantities of loot, so if there was such a thing as a typical wako 'pirate ship' at this time then it was probably the larger ocean-going *kenmansen*. This type of vessel was frequently used for trading and diplomatic missions to China and Korea, and as the line between trade and piracy was often a fine one we can safely conclude that it was a favourite of the wako. The *kenmansen* ships were about 55m (180ft) long and had two masts. They were originally intended for voyages only in home waters, and were modified for ocean-going service by providing cabins and enlarging the foresail to improve performance. One of the cabins would have been reserved for the use of an ambassador and his retinue when in diplomatic service. Its carrying capacity in the hold was about 2,000 *koku*, but this would have been reduced by two-thirds when the ship was being used for ambassadorial purposes. The large carrying capacity made it ideal for a wako vessel, and this conclusion is supported by the depiction of what is almost certainly a *kenmansen* on the illustrated *Wokou* scroll discussed above. It has two masts and two cabins, although the one in the middle of the deck is currently occupied not by an envoy but by a miserable-looking female captive. A very detailed *kenmansen* also appears on the contemporary *Shinnyodo Engi emaki* scroll, which has provided the source for a model of the ship in the Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of History.

Anchored behind the *kenmansen* on the *Wokou* scroll we see another type of ship. It is painted to look much larger and is shown with three masts. It therefore probably represents a crude attempt to illustrate either

**The *Jingu Kogo Engi emaki* was painted in 1433, and shows the legendary invasion of Korea by Empress Jingu. The details of the warriors and the ships, however, are of the time when the scroll was painted. The ship on the Jingu scroll is of 400 *koku*, and is powered by oars and one sail. Its primary role as a fighting ship is shown by the addition to the single cabin on deck of two tall *yagura* (open fighting towers): one in the bow and one in the stern. They resemble the simple wooden towers seen in scrolls of castles of the period. On deck are a number of samurai, fully armoured with bows and arrows. Such vessels would certainly have been seen on pirate raids.**









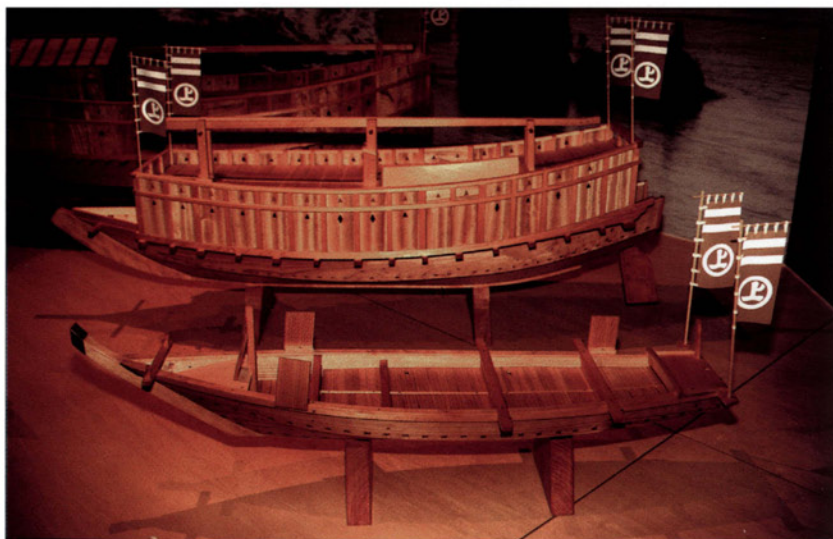
A model of an *atakebune* ship, the main fighting ship of the pirate fleets that operated in the Inland Sea during the 16th century. This model, in the Noshima Murakami Navy Museum in Miyakubo, proudly bears the flag of the Murakami family.

an *atakebune* or a *sekibune*, one of the main warships used during the 16th century in the *daimyo*'s navies. Unlike the *kenminsen* these were dedicated warships, not trading vessels adopted for other uses, so their inclusion on the scroll must represent their use in a sea-fighting capacity, which is how they would be used during the invasions of Korea in 1592 and 1597. Oars were the main means of propulsion, but there was also one sail slung from a mast that could be pivoted and laid along the length of the ship. The lowered mast rested on three supports, which may explain why the Chinese artist showed the ship as being three-masted. The carrying capacity of an *atakebune* was much less than that of the *kenminsen*, being only 800 *koku*, because it was meant to carry fighting men, not trading goods. When used by *kaizoku* in the Inland Sea these slow but formidable craft were manned by 80 oarsmen, and carried 60 fighting men, with artillery consisting of three cannon and 30 arquebuses. The *atakebune* became the flagship of the *daimyo suigun* (navies), although in appearance it was just a large box with a heavy prow, resembling nothing less than a floating wooden castle with a *tate ita* (gunwale) of planking 6–10cm (2½–4in.) thick. Along the four sides loopholes were cut for guns and bows, leaving no dead space that was not covered by defensive fire. Part of the *tate ita* was hinged, allowing it to be let down to form a bridge across which an enemy vessel could be boarded.

#### PLATE D: A FULLY RIGGED KENMINSEN JAPANESE PIRATE SHIP IN ACTION IN A RAID ON KOREA, 1419

The *kenminsen* was the type of ship most favoured for ocean-going trading, so it found ready use as a pirate ship for the *wako*. Here we see a *kenminsen* being used to attack Korea in the months immediately prior to the Oei Invasion of Tsushima in 1419, which put a stop to pirate activity for many years. The details of the *wako*'s appearance is taken from the Tokyo version of the *Wokou tujuan*, or Illustrated Scroll of the Wako, while the ship is based on a model in the Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of History, itself based on an illustration in the *Shinnyodo Engi emaki* scroll. Because of its primary use for carrying cargo or diplomatic personnel the ship has good-sized accommodation on board, which will now be put into use for transporting slaves. The *wako* are lightly clad and carry a minimum of weapons as they wade ashore, just as they are illustrated on the Tokyo version of the *Wokou tujuan* scroll. There is consternation in the undefended Korean village.

A *sekibune* and a *kobaya*, the two types of ship that, together with the larger *atakebune*, made up the fleets of the pirates of the Inland Sea. (Noshima Murakami Navy Museum in Miyakubo)



*Kaizoku* fleets such as the Murakami employed two other types of ship. Second in size, and most numerous, were the *sekibune*. They were recognizable by their long pointed bows, and corresponded to the *atakebune* on several points. Weight was saved by making them narrower, and replacing the heavy planking of the *tate ita* by bamboo. They were crewed by 40 oarsmen, and carried 30 samurai armed with one cannon and 20 arquebuses. The *sekibune* formed the backbone of any feudal navy, and were extensively used by the Murakami. The smallest type of boat was the *kobaya*. There was no *yagura*-type superstructure, just open decking with a short *tate ita* called a *hangaki*; around this was built an open framework across which thick padded cloths could be hung as a protection against arrows. They had a crew of 20 oarsmen and carried ten samurai, of whom eight had arquebuses. They were mainly used for scouting, reconnaissance and communications.

Unloading stores on the pirate island of Noshima as shown by a diorama in the Noshima Murakami Navy Museum in Miyakubo.



## THE DAILY LIFE OF THE PIRATES

### Famine and raiding

The historical accounts of the revolt of Fujiwara Sumitomo suggest that during the 10th century numerous separate pirate bands existed who were capable of coming together and operating jointly under the leadership of an inspired individual. Such alliances appear usually to have been motivated by desperation caused by famine arising from drought or typhoon damage. These natural disasters could devastate communities, and the resulting loss of life could be quite extensive. For example, in 1260 the monk Nichiren wrote in *Rissho ankokuuron*:





More and more in recent times there have been extraordinary occurrences in the heavens and on the earth, famine and epidemics everywhere spread across the land. Oxen and horses die at the crossroads and skeletons exceed more than half. Families do not lament them. There is positively no one left... More and more are pressed by famine. Beggars meet the eye everywhere and the dead fill the eye, corpses lie about and in rows like a bridge.

**Map of the Inland Sea, showing the area of operations of the Murakami kaizoku.**

In the absence of such disasters the island communities eked out a peaceful yet meagre existence from fishing and growing crops. The wako heartlands were always among the poorest in all Japan, and this forced their inhabitants to seek sustenance from the sea, legitimately or otherwise. It is easy to see how the inhabitants of small islands or remote coastal communities, whose existence was always precarious, could be driven to take up raiding against more fortunate populations either at home or abroad. A Korean envoy who visited Iki in 1444 wrote quite sympathetically about the plight of the islanders who periodically ravaged his country:

In these regions, the people's dwellings are miserable; land is tight and, moreover, utterly barren, so that they do not pursue agriculture and can scarcely escape starvation; thus they engage in banditry, being of a wicked and violent cast... But if we attend them with courtesy and nourish them with generosity, even more so than in previous days, then the pirates will all submit.

The Jesuit Luis Frois encounters Murakami Motoyoshi, lord of the island of Noshima, from a painting in the Noshima Murakami Navy Museum in Miyakubo. The Jesuits, like all travellers through Murakami territory, were required to pay tolls to the pirate lords in order to pass through their territorial waters. In the background we see the island fortress of Noshima.



### The organization of a pirate band

From being loose confederations of pirates between the 10th and 14th centuries the *kaizoku* of the 16th century became as well organized and as well structured as any of their counterparts on land. Accounts of the naval operations in the Inland Sea during the 16th century indicate that the pirate lords obeyed all the customary niceties of contemporary samurai behaviour: from prayers for victory to head collection. When the Murakami went into battle their customary farewell meal included octopus, because with its eight 'arms' it was protected against enemies from all directions. They also behaved in a very similar way to their landlubber contemporaries in terms of aggression, ambition and family pride. The Portuguese Jesuit Luis Frois has left us the following description of Murakami Motoyoshi and his pirate lair:

We arrived at a certain island. The greatest pirate in Japan resides on this island. He has built a large castle there. There are ships from his followers and from his territories. Their ships constantly pick up the spoils. This pirate is called the Lord of Noshima. It is a fact that he has strong support. Those who dwell on the coasts and seashores pay him tribute every year out of fear that they may be destroyed by the Lord of Noshima.

Motoyoshi's reputation was such that it is even noted as follows in Samuel Purchas's *Pilgrimes*:

Noximandono is mentioned by the Jesuites in this time to have had a great Fleet of ships, and to have forced a great part of the coast to yearly tribute unto him, to bee freed from his Robberies.

The extensive Murakami clan was divided into three branches, each based on one of the numerous islands that form a chain from Iyo province in Shikoku across the Inland Sea to Honshu near modern Onomichi. The Innoshima branch took its name from one of the largest islands, while tiny Noshima, protected by a dangerous tidal current between the islands of Hijikata and Oshima, gave its name to the second branch. Kurushima, just off the Iyo coast, provided the third outpost.

Gazing out to sea towards the island that was his base, is this statue of Murakami Motoyoshi outside the Noshima Murakami Navy Museum in Miyakubo. Motoyoshi was the notorious 'Lord of Noshima' described by Luis Frois.





Murakami Yoshimitsu is a famous leader from Innoshima, but the other two branches were to supply the clan's most illustrious members. From Noshima, Murakami Takeyoshi (1533–1604) took on the mighty Oda Nobunaga at the first and second battles of Kizugawaguchi in 1576 and 1578. His oldest son Motoyoshi, born in 1553 (the same lord mentioned above), also fought at Kizugawaguchi. His second son Kagechika was born in 1558 and died in 1610.

On the island of Kurushima, Murakami Michiyasu (1518–67) was the archetypal *kaizoku* leader of the Age of Warring States, while his two sons were to achieve fame in a very different way. Michiyuki and Michifusa, whose family names appear in the records as Kurushima rather than Murakami, took a prominent role in naval operations during Hideyoshi's invasions of Korea, and each paid with his life. Michiyuki was one of the Japanese commanders defeated by Admiral Yi Sunsin at the battle of Dangpo in 1592. Michiyuki's brother Michifusa was killed during the naval battle of Myeongyang in 1597.

These pirate lords ruled the inhabitants of their domains through a vast hierarchical structure, and the total control they exercised meant that they were engaged in numerous legitimate maritime occupations in addition to criminal ones. Fishing, ship-building and salt-making all fell under the jurisdiction of the pirate lords.

### Pirate bases

The physical environment of the pirate was closely related to the organization of the pirate band. Any Japanese 'pirate base' during the time of Sumitomo's rebellion or the wako raids on Korea would have been no more, and no less, than the fishing villages that sustained them during peacetime. Such locations were, however, well guarded and strategically placed, where the wako exploited their local knowledge of tides, secluded coves and hidden seashore caves. One such place, associated with the pirates of Kumano in Kii province, is identified as the cave at the foot of the cliffs of Sandanbeki near Shirahama. Now inevitably displayed to tourists as a pirate cave, it may well indeed have acted as a regular refuge for the Kumano *kaizoku*.

The 16th-century *kaizoku* lords of the Inland Sea maintained much more impressive bases, and regularly built castles. The sites were easily defended and overlooked the busiest channels of the Inland Sea, from where a stranglehold could be placed on maritime traffic to guarantee a profitable return. There were three types of fortresses that went under the generic name of *umijiro* (sea castles):

- a) castles built on an isolated island or group of islands
- b) castles on a hilltop overlooking a harbour
- c) some combination of the two



Murakami Yoshimitsu, the most illustrious member of the Innoshima branch of the Murakami family, depicted on a painted scroll in the Pirate Castle on Innoshima.

Murakami Michiyasu (1518–67), the archetypal pirate lord of the Inland Sea, who ruled the sea area near modern Imabari on Shikoku from his tiny island of Kurushima.





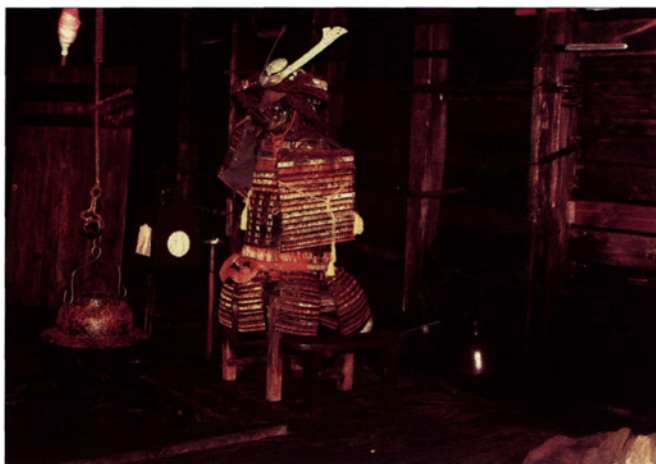
The so-called 'pirate cave' in the Sandanbeki cliff at Shirahama on the Kii peninsula (Wakayama Prefecture) may well have been used as a refuge by the Kumano pirates.



Those built overlooking a harbour, such as Aoki on Innoshima, would have resembled the *wajo*, the castles built in Korea during the Japanese occupation from 1593 to 1598. Of those built on an isolated island, often the whole island became the castle, as on Kurushima, the tiny island that gave its name to that branch of the Murakami family. Kurushima nowadays has a vastly extended harbour, and the site once occupied by the castle keep is dominated by an enormous communications mast.

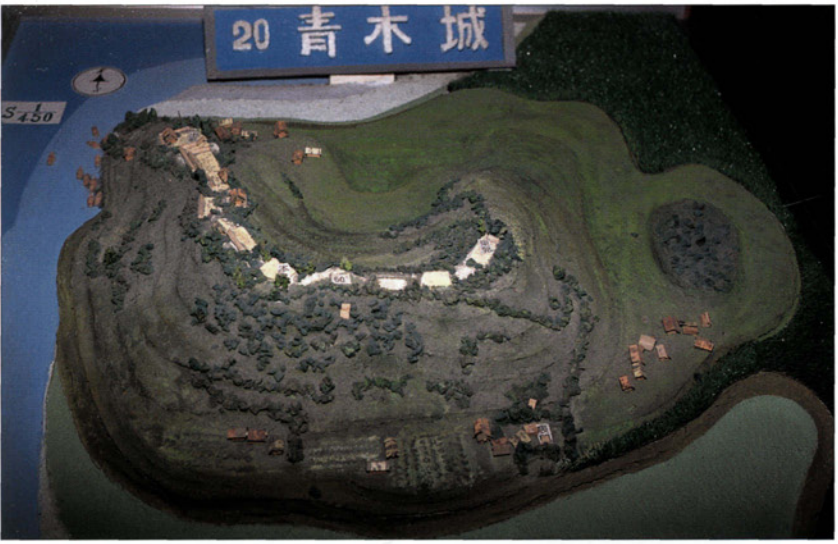
The most interesting example of a pirate island base is Noshima. Noshima actually consists of two islands that are separated by a narrow strait through which rushes an extraordinarily fierce tidal race: a powerful disincentive to any enemy unfamiliar with the area. During the time of the Murakami of Noshima the two islands were connected by a primitive suspension bridge, and each island had a harbour that was defended by wooden walls. Further defensive fortifications were found on the nearby 'mainland' of Oshima where the modern town of Miyakubo now lies. This complex was a simple *hirajiro* (castle on a plain) on the western side of the river. Just like the island bases, it was fully capable of providing anchorage and facilities for the largest *atakebune* warships.

The interior of the 'pirate cave' below Sandanbeki in Shirahama, showing a suit of armour and domestic implements.



The close collusion between Japanese and Chinese pirates meant that several important wako bases were located in China, either in coastal or river areas or on islands. Literally hundreds of islands lie off Ningbo in Zhejiang province. They provided ready-made lairs from which the wako could raid deeply into China with comparative ease. The familiarity of island surroundings would have made any Japanese pirate from Kyushu feel at home, apart from the absence of crystal-clear blue waters. Around the Zhoushan archipelago the sea is brown from the silt washed down the Yangzi. Farther south, Taiwan remained a pirate lair until the arrival of the Dutch a century later.





A model of the Murakami family's castle of Aoki on Innoshima, a good example of a pirate *umijiro* (sea castle) that makes use of a promontory to protect an anchorage. (By kind permission of Innoshima Pirate Castle)

Pirates were also based on the islands between Japan, China and Korea. The 'northern route' through Iki and Tsushima, which provided the easiest route to Korea and Manchuria, has already been mentioned. But as the chain of the Ryukyu Islands provides a 'southern route' from Japan to China via Taiwan, it is not surprising to read of pirates making use of Okinawa or the other smaller islands of the Ryukyu group. This was not welcomed by the native inhabitants, particularly when the pirates disguised themselves as legitimate Ryukyuan traders. The harbour of Naha was defended against pirates, and repulsed at least two wako raids, but the Ryukyu Islands are so extensive that it was not difficult for the wako to use safe anchorages without being molested. The castle of Gushikawa on the island of Kumejima has been identified from archaeological finds as a pirate base. The more remote islands of the Yaeyama group also provided staging posts and moorings for wako. Kabira Bay on Ishigaki Island was one such safe anchorage, as was the island of Iriomote, where pirates took refuge along the rivers that led into its jungle-covered interior.

Strange to relate, on one occasion Okinawa almost gave piracy the seal of royal approval. King Sho Toku of the Chuzan kingdom was a headstrong youth aged 21 who had imbued the romantic notions of the wako life when he succeeded to the throne in 1420. Being determined upon an overseas military adventure, he led an invasion of the far from formidable island of Kikai, which was tiny and virtually unpopulated. The young king sailed under the banner of Hachiman and adopted the crest of three commas as the emblem of the royal house. The venture was an unsurprising success, but proved such a drain on the Okinawan treasury that Sho Toku was eventually deposed.

**Trading, smuggling and extortion**

For the countries of East Asia during the time that the wako operated war, trade and piracy were hopelessly intermingled and flourished wherever and whenever the authorities lacked the means or the will to control a situation that they themselves had often created. That legitimate trade was indeed possible is shown by a Ming document that contains a list of articles sought by the Japanese. It includes silk cloth, silk wadding









The two islands that make up Noshima as they are today. This photograph was taken during a particularly fierce example of the furious tidal race that separates Noshima from the islands of Oshima and Hakatajima, providing the perfect defence for the most important base of the Noshima branch of the Murakami family.

(for lining garments), crimson thread, mercury, needles, iron chains, iron cauldrons, ceramics, old cash, paintings and calligraphy, medicines, cosmetic powder, bamboo and lacquer ware and vinegar.

Such goods changed hands legally under the accepted system of tally and tribute, but matters never seemed to be completely straightforward. In 1496, after Japanese tribute envoys killed several people on their return from Beijing, the number of people allowed on each mission from Japan to China was reduced from 400 to 50. This provoked fierce competition among the *daimyo* for these privileged places, a situation that led to violence in 1523 when two separate tribute missions arrived in Ningbo. One was from the Hosokawa family; the other was from the Ouchi. The Ouchi representative bribed the eunuch in charge to give them preferential treatment. When the Hosokawa found out a brawl began. It ended with the Hosokawa looting Ningbo, and the Ming commander sent to pursue them as they fled was killed in a sea battle. Trade was suspended until 1527, when Japanese envoys were permitted to land provided that there were no warriors among them and the numbers did not exceed 100 people and three ships. The next tribute mission arrived at Ningbo in 1539. The local authorities searched the ship and found weapons, which were confiscated. The envoys were then kept under close surveillance and no trade was conducted.

#### **PLATE E: THE MURAKAMI PIRATE BASE AT NOSHIMA, 1585**

The greatest example of a *kaizoku umijiro* (island castle) was the island of Noshima in the Inland Sea. Here we see it at the height of its greatness just before Hideyoshi's invasion of Shikoku Island in 1585. Noshima actually consists of two islands that are separated by a narrow strait through which rushes an extraordinarily fierce tidal race. Only ships familiar with the area would dare approach anywhere near it. During the time of the Murakami of Noshima the two islands were connected by a primitive suspension bridge, and each island had a harbour that was defended by wooden walls. The castle that takes up almost the whole of the island is a simple form of *yamashiro*, the classic mountain castle model of 16th-century Japan. This plate is based on a reconstruction displayed in the Noshima Murakami Naval Museum in Miyakubo on Oshima island in the Inland Sea, from where the site is visible.





**Kabira Bay on the island of Ishigaki is nowadays an anchorage for pleasure craft and the centre of black pearl cultivation, but in the days of the wako it provided a haven for pirate craft operating in the Yaeyama Islands between Okinawa and Taiwan.**

**The mouth of the Urauchi river on the jungle-covered island of Iriomote, showing the characteristic mangrove trees with their roots in the water. This island of the Yaeyama group provided a remote hideout for pirates operating between Okinawa and Taiwan.**



Needless to say, renegade Chinese traders were eager to help trade on its way whenever the authorities made life difficult, so when a further mission from Japan was turned away in 1544 the Japanese seized upon the opportunity offered to them by the notorious Wang Zhi. This man, who was to become known as the 'King of the Wako', offered to act as their representative. It was the beginning of a remarkable career development for Wang Zhi, who was still willing to cooperate with the Chinese authorities when it suited him, even to the extent of capturing wako for them. But the results of his positive endeavours turned out to be not a loosening of the restrictions on overseas trade but a reduction in it, even to the ludicrous extent that fishing boats were forbidden to put to sea. Wang Zhi therefore abandoned cooperation in favour of piracy, and by 1556 the entire region from Nanjing to Hangzhou had fallen under his personal control.

By contrast, the domestic pirates of the Inland Sea made their fortunes principally by extortion, requiring passing ships to pay protection money. This allowed for a considerable economy of forces on the part of the *kaizoku*, who confined themselves to attacking only those ships whose captains had been unwise enough not to pay up. Their 'toll barriers of the sea' were very effective, and totally indiscriminating in respect of whom they challenged. As early as 1420 a Korean emissary discovered that two pirate bands had split the territory between them so that he had to pay for a member of one gang to take him through the territory of the other. An outrageous incident occurred in 1581 when a ship carrying the Jesuits Luis Frois and Alessandro Valignano managed to avoid the toll being levied by the Murakami of Noshima; but by the time the priests arrived in Sakai



their ship was caught and surrounded by pirate vessels and forced to pay up. As an alternative to handing over protection money at toll barriers sea captains could purchase in advance a pass of safe conduct in the form of a flag bearing the Murakami family crest. This guaranteed them immunity from further toll charges or any piratical activity within the Murakami domains. The flags even had force as late as 1586, a full year after Hideyoshi had conquered Shikoku.

It was also possible to sponsor a pirate band. The candidates for such patronage arrangements were usually *daimyo* who wished to extend their influence into remote sea areas, although sponsorship by temples was not unknown. The Noshima Murakami were often in the market for making deals, but with the sense of independence that they could certainly afford, they readily transferred their favours from one patron to another. Between 1542 and 1580 the Noshima portfolio passed back and forth between the Kono, the Ouchi and the Mori; on one occasion even Oda Nobunaga was considered as a customer and then haughtily rejected.

## CAMPAIGN LIFE (1): THE MECHANICS OF A PIRATE RAID

Many written accounts tell how the pirates' operational ruthlessness matched their terrifying appearance. We noted earlier the description of Japan by Khubilai Khan's envoy in 1269 as a 'country of thugs'. When Zheng Sixiao (1241–1318), a scholar who dreamed of the overthrow of the Yuan dynasty and the restoration of the Song dynasty, heard of the defeat of the Mongol armada by these 'thugs' he wrote poetry in celebration of the event, but his words were tinged with the fear of those who had brought it about. His description of the Japanese was that they were 'fierce and do not fear death... A group of ten Japanese soldiers will fight, even if it is against an enemy unit of one hundred. They will forfeit their lives in battle, even if they are unable to win.' He also added the curious assertion that was to be repeated later that 'the Japanese are adept in water and do not sink'. During the Ming dynasty literary descriptions would render the wako as 'black demons' that could stay under water day and night and caught fish and shrimps which they ate raw. Elsewhere they are compared to sharks, or, best of all, 'flood-dragons': the evil monsters of Chinese folklore that can summon wind and rain to cause floods. The Ming scholar Li Panlong attributed the difficulties in subduing pirates to the fact that they had this keen advantage in battles on water. They were accustomed to fighting at sea, could dive deeply under water and even bored holes in ships while they were down there. On the open sea they used their ships like city walls with moats.

Similar impressions of the wako were shared by those Europeans who encountered them. In 1605 an English captain, Sir Edward Michelborne, wrote after a battle with them that 'the Japons are not suffered to land in any port in India with weapons; being accounted a people so desperate and daring, that they are feared in all places where they come'. The Dutch admiral Cornelis Matelief de Jonge encountered another wako vessel some time later, and wrote that:

The flag of the Murakami *kaizoku*, bearing the second character of the family name.



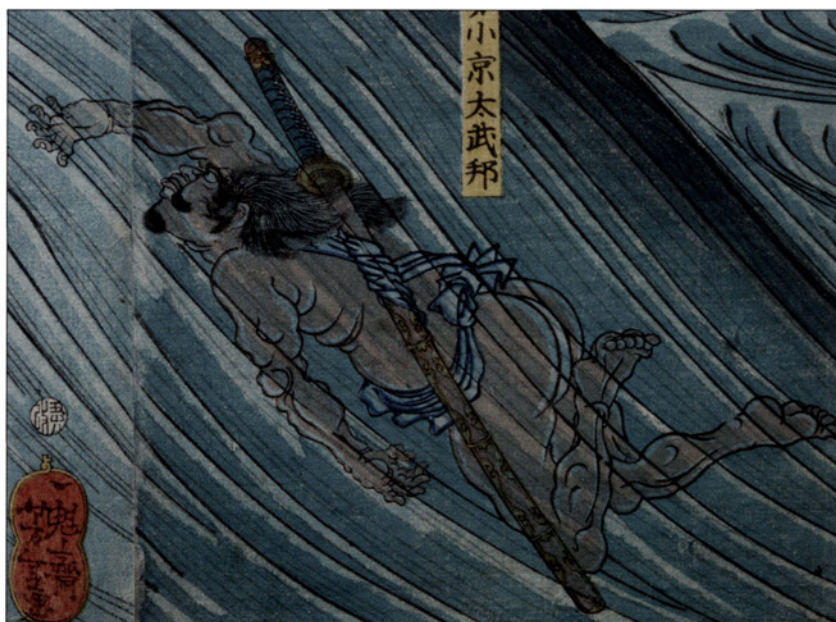
These Japanese were all brave men and looked like pirates, as indeed they were. They are a very determined race, for when they see they will be overwhelmed by the Chinese, they cut open their own bellies rather than fall alive into the hands of their enemies and be tortured to death.

In spite of this impression of uncontrolled ruthlessness, a considerable organization directed the pirates' ferocity in battle, and the numerous accounts left by their victims allow us to reconstruct the progress of a typical wako raid. These were always conducted like a military operation in miniature, although some raids were anything but miniature in scale or in planning. To begin one typical attack on China in 1554 several hundred pirates swam ashore from their ships and blew on conch shells to assemble their forces. Sometimes the wako would even set fire to their own ships on landing to show that there would be no retreat. Their confidence was such that they knew they could commandeer enough Chinese ships for their eventual return home. This was not usually very difficult, because Chinese troops often fled and hid when a pirate ship appeared on the horizon, but on the occasion related below this defiant act almost backfired.

A common practice during raids was to set fire to government offices and the personal residences of senior officials. Pirates would even rob graves in case valuables had been buried inside them. Men were butchered, women were raped, and when the pirates departed they left only charred destruction behind them. Atrocities during raids were inevitable and are sickeningly recorded. In *Shuyu zhouzi lu* we read:

They tied infants to poles and splashed them with boiling water, laughing at their screams. They calculated the gender of the foetuses of pregnant women they had captured then slashed the women's bellies open to see who was right since they had made bets of wine on the outcome.

The Chinese commonly believed that the Japanese pirates were adept in water and did not sink, and would even dive under water to bore holes in ships. They were otherwise compared to the flood-dragons of Chinese mythology. This unusual illustration of a Japanese warrior swimming under water is from a print by Kuniyoshi depicting the battle of Dannoura in 1185.





Admittedly, this behaviour is the stock in trade of atrocity descriptions from the sack of Antwerp to Nazi Germany, but there is every reason to believe that the wako raids were horrible experiences. 'They came like fleeing wolves and left like startled birds,' wrote one Ming scholar as a poetic way of illustrating the pirates' sudden arrival from nowhere and their equally rapid dispersal. Surprise was indeed a very useful asset, and a Korean account notes that the wako raid of 1226 came about when:

Men from Tsushima and elsewhere came to the residence reserved for Japanese visitors at Geumju and under cover of darkness entered the town through a hole in the wall and looted the principal buildings of the town, [and] thereafter plundered some villages along the coast.

In *Riben kao*, a work composed by Li Yangong and Hao Jie, there is a section entitled *Kou shu* (pirate techniques) based on observations of the tricks and tactics used by the wako. Beginning at the commencement of a raid, *Kou shu* notes that they might feign attack from the east but then actually attack from the west. Sometimes they pretended to attack but then withdrew. They might raise their sails and seize their oars as if departing but actually go ashore. Their final advance would always be made without warning.

Some treacherous Chinese people worked for the wako as guides and informants. They could be coerced into doing this to avoid death, but captured artisans were generally well treated and rewarded so that they could make weapons for pirates engaged in an extended raid. Captives could also be put to use to aid in the pirates' tactics. A prisoner might be dressed up to look like a pirate but would have had his tongue cut out so that he did not give the game away. As a result of this practice some innocent captives were executed by the Chinese while genuine pirates were released. The pirates might also force women to attack Chinese troops, or drive a herd of sheep before them. As an alternative way of drawing the enemy fire one or two pirates might make a suicide attack.

A typical wako raid would be carried out by a number of groups each about 30 strong, who would keep no more than 100 to 200m (328 to 656ft) apart. They communicated by using conch shell trumpets so that one section could aid another in distress, and advanced like 'a long slithering snake with a hundred legged banner', which may mean a flag with a centipede motif. Particularly fierce warriors were deployed at the front and rear of a squad. When facing a Ming army the leader would wave his fan and his followers would brandish their swords so that it looked like a swarm of butterflies. While the Ming army watched anxiously the pirates would rush into the attack, and would storm an encampment slashing furiously with their swords.

On entering towns, however, the pirates became very cautious, avoiding walls from which stones might be dropped on them, and making captives taste any food or drink in case it was poisoned. Alleyways and narrow streets were also avoided in case of ambush. When fire was used against a town the wako would cover their ships in wet bedding for protection.

Rice often featured prominently among the booty captured. In Korea in 1372 such a huge amount of tax rice was seized by Japanese raiders that the spilt grains on the wako ships accumulated to the depth of 0.3m (1ft).

Otherwise the items that were most sought after were gold, silver and slaves. In one Japanese raid on Korea in 1415, the wako took gold and kidnapped 150 citizens, while Korean records confirm that slaves were often included in the booty taken back to Japan by Japanese pirates. In 1420 the author of a travel diary to Japan reported that he had come across a Japanese merchant vessel while on his way to Japan. On board was a Chinese slave, who had presumably been sold to the captain by pirates. He was sobbing and begged for food, asking the Korean visitor to buy him so that he could escape from his miserable condition. Nine years later a report was presented to the Korean government by a diplomat who had visited Japan:

Previously the Wa pirates would invade our country, seize our people, and make slaves of them. Alternatively they would sell them to distant countries and cause it so that they could never come home... Wherever we went and whenever our ships put into port in Japan, [Korean] slaves would struggle against each other in their efforts to flee to us, but they were unable to do so because of the chains that their masters had put on them.

Taking people alive was sometimes done to obtain ransom, as noted by Xiu Jie, who died in 1604:

At first, the pirates only kidnapped people and forced their relatives to go to their lair to pay ransom. Then they occupied our interior, stayed where they were, killed our commanding officers, attacked our cities and almost created an irretrievable situation.

## **CAMPAIGN LIFE (2): DEFENSIVE MEASURES AGAINST PIRATE RAIDS**

### **Fortification**

The Korean and Chinese sources are full of discussions on how to defend against the wako. One radical approach would have been to deny the pirates their bases and staging areas, but this would have required China to annexe Taiwan, the Ryukyu Islands and maybe even part of Japan itself.

### **PLATE F: THE FORTIFIED HARBOUR OF DENGZHOU (MODERN PENGLAI), 1560**

In response to the wako raids the Ming dynasty created what was virtually a 'Great Wall of the Sea' through a series of beacon towers and harbour defences along the Chinese coast. Here we see a reconstruction of one of its finest components, the fortified harbour of Dengzhou (modern Penglai), which was begun in 1376. It is based on a reconstruction made by the local government, who have been restoring the site to its appearance under the Ming. The entrance to the harbour is very narrow and is dominated by a signalling station and a tower on which cannon are mounted. It is not unlike the Old Dragon's Head, the eastern extremity of the Great Wall of China near Shanhaiguan. A rocky breakwater reaching out into the sea further restricts the movement of incoming ships. A vessel entering the outer harbour then has to pass along a narrow winding channel overlooked by a large multistorey tower built into the wall that encircles it. The inner harbour is accessed by a further narrow gap crossed by a drawbridge. The whole complex is surrounded by high city walls, and there is a large gatehouse on the landward side that provides the only exit by land. The castle-like building on the cliffs above the harbour contains a mixture of temples, signalling stations and domestic buildings and is now known as the Penglai Pavilion. Under the Qing dynasty it was a popular spot for aristocratic relaxation, a thought far from the minds of the garrison who later defended Dengzhou against the wako.









**The outer wall of the Nagan Folk Village near Suncheon in Korea. Nagan is the best preserved of the walled towns defended against wako attacks. Its original earth wall was built in 1397, and replaced by a stone wall in 1424.**

province, is an excellent example. This fortified settlement, now preserved as a folk village, received an earthen wall in 1397 and a stone one in 1424. In China the raids of the Ming dynasty prompted the construction of a 'Great Wall of the Sea' that consisted of coastal and island defences and signalling stations. The fortified harbour of Dengzhou (modern Penglai), one of its finest components, was built in 1376. Walled cities such as Nanjing and Suzhou cities presented the wako with quite a challenge, and it was not until 1561, when Xinhua in Fujian province fell to a pirate raid, that the whole of a walled city was captured.

Both China and Korea made good use of beacons and lookout towers. One has recently been restored at Jujeon, high on the cliffs overlooking the sea near Ulsan on South Korea's east coast. It consists of a cylindrical stone tower, with a platform within battlements where smoke signals could be given during the day and fire during the night. The idea was that a chain of beacons could relay a message back to the capital very quickly. Different messages were conveyed by the number of times the beacon was lit and extinguished. During the 12th century a single fire meant approaching danger, two or three increasing urgency, and four was a call for help at once. After 1392 the system was improved, and the relay chain was tested every night with a single beacon. The code then developed that one fire indicated that all was calm. Another was lit when an enemy appeared. Three meant that the enemy was approaching the border or the coast. Four meant that he had landed or crossed the border. Five indicated that fighting had begun and that reinforcements were urgently required. By this time the actual multiple of fires was lit, rather than successive individual fires, so that the messages had more clarity.

### **Armed resistance**

Korea's greatest asset in combating wako was its navy and its artillery, both of which developed an enviable expertise. The best known achievements by Korean ships against Japan are of course Admiral Yi Sunsin's turtle ship battles in 1592, but these victories were based on a long-established naval tradition that dated back to the first wako raids. Korean vessels were strongly built and suffered much less damage than their Chinese equivalents during the Mongol invasions of Japan.

Korea was also at the forefront of the development of shipboard artillery. As early as 1356 there had been experiments with gunpowder weapons that could shoot wooden arrows. In 1373 tests were being carried



out of incendiary arrows and 'fire tubes', which probably refers to fire lances: devices like roman candles on the end of spears. In that same year of 1373 certain memorials submitted to the Korean Court urged the building of ships. A major step forward happened in 1377 when Choi Museon learned the art of gunpowder and firearms manufacture, and by 1378 a fleet armed with cannon was ready to take on the wako. Their chance came in 1380, when the Korean navy met a wako fleet off the mouth of the Geum river. Most of the pirates had gone ashore, leaving only a few men behind to guard the ships. On seeing the approach of the Korean ships the Japanese moved into the attack, totally oblivious of the innovation of cannon. Choi Museon directed the use of firearms and soon the entire wako fleet was ablaze. In 1383 Cheong Ji burned 17 out of a 20-ship fleet of wako using similar techniques. So successful were these actions that the armament programme was stepped up, and by 1410 160 Korean ships are recorded as having cannon on board.

Guns were also an asset in China, where two generals in particular made a name for themselves defending their coasts against the wako. In 1553 Yu Dayou defeated a wako army at the battle of Putoushan, the 'holy island' within the Zhoushan archipelago off Ningbo. Yu Dayou strongly disagreed with the prevalent belief that the Japanese were 'adept in water' and superior at sea fighting. He demonstrated this by repeatedly defeating the wako offshore, and urged that the pirates should be engaged in battle before they had time to land. Resources, he argued, should be diverted from land warfare towards equipping more warships with heavy artillery. Yu wrote, 'In sea battles there is no special trick. Larger ships defeat smaller ships. Larger guns defeat smaller guns.' Yet in spite of Yu Dayou's fine track record his words went unheeded, and his career ended ignominiously when he was arrested in April 1559 for failing to pursue the pirate fleets. In fact it was his subordinate commander who had let them get away, but Yu was forced to take the blame.

Yu Dayou's successor and protégé Qi Jiguang was transferred to Zhejiang in 1555 to fight the wako, where his first task proved to be to organize a new army. He made the following observation:

The numerous battles I have fought over the past several years give me the impression that the pirates always manage to sit on the heights waiting for us. Usually they hold on till evening, when our soldiers become tired. They then dash out. Or else, when we start to withdraw, they will catch us out of step to launch their counter attack. It seems that they always manage to send forth their units when they are fresh and spirited. They adorn their helmets with coloured strings and animal horns of metallic colours and



**The Jujeon smoke-signal tower on the east coast of Korea near Ulsan. It was built to give warning of the approach of wako raids. Smoke was used by day and fire by night.**

**Inside the Jujeon smoke-signal tower, showing where the beacons were lit.**







**A defended gateway in the wall of Nagan Folk Village. Characteristic of Korean defensive architecture, the gateway is defended by a solid stone wall that extends outwards to oblige an attacker to make a 90 degree turn.**

ghostly shapes to frighten our soldiers. Many of them carry mirrors. Their spears and swords are polished to a shine and look dazzling under the sun. Our soldiers, therefore, are awed by them during the hours of delay before contact.

Qi introduced an 'incentive scheme' of 30 ounces of silver for every pirate head cut off and delivered, but he had to be very ruthless with his own men in order to overcome the wako. In a battle in 1562, when his troops tried to recapture a stone bridge from the Japanese, 36 Chinese died

in the first unsuccessful attempt. The second squad also lost half its men, whereupon Qi personally cut down the retreating squad commander, and eventually the Japanese were overcome.

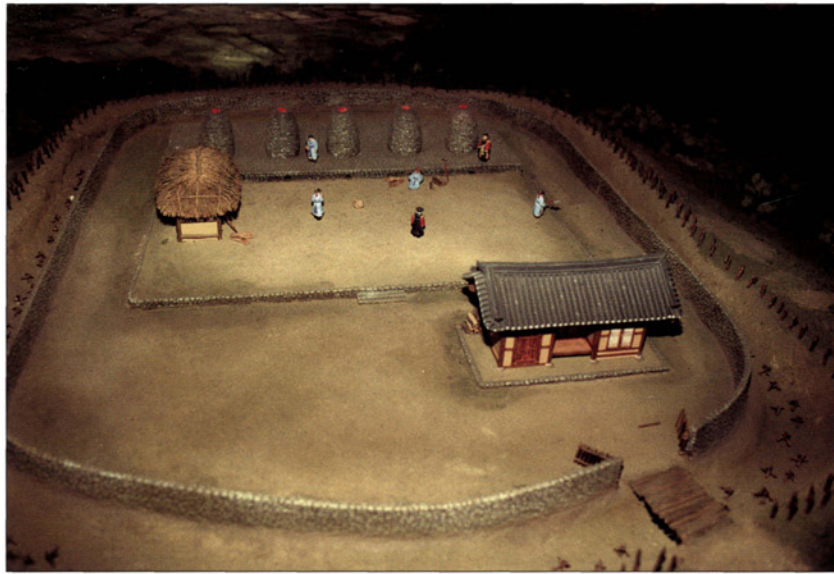
To take on the pirates Qi Jiguang developed a strange tactic known as the 'mandarin duck formation', which was based around a unit of 12 men. Four spearmen constituted the main striking force, with four more soldiers acting as a protective shield for them. Two of them had shields: the one on the right held an elongated pentagon-shaped shield, while the man on the left had a round shield. He was supposed to throw javelins then crawl forward towards the enemy to lure them into the open. They were followed by two men carrying bamboo trees complete with upper branches. These simple devices were intended to pinion the pirates to the ground, and were later replaced by metal weapons. Behind the spearmen were two rearguard men with fork-headed polearms, from which arrows could be fired by gunpowder. A corporal and a cook/porter completed the dozen.

The whole scenario sounds more like Peking Opera than infantry tactics, but its division of labour seems to have been effective against raiding pirates. Indeed, Qi was a successful general from the time of his appointment in 1559 and never lost a battle. In 1561 he used his mandarin duck formation to gain a notable victory at Taizhou. At the battle of Hengyu he made use of his local knowledge of the tides to surprise the pirates on the island. His men carried bales of rice straw to build a causeway and rushed in to the attack. By 1567 the war against the wako had been won. The Great Wall of China was to be his new challenge.



**The Pan Men in Suzhou is a double water gate combined with a double land gate built against the Japanese pirates. Here we see the outer entrance to the water gate, which is defended by two stone portcullises that could be dropped across the canal.**





A model of the elaborate signalling station on Mount Hwangnyeong, built to give warning of wako attacks on Busan, Korea's main port. On 14 April 1592 a signal was given here to announce the arrival of the Japanese invading force, which reached Seoul by relay stations three days later.

## Negotiation

On occasions the pirates could be curbed by appropriate negotiation, particularly if the current wave of piracy had been prompted by an unwise curtailment of trade. For example the great scholar-official Xu Guangdi (1562–1633) realized that there had to be more to Japan than merely an island full of robbers. He argued that the secret to controlling the wako lay not in the use of military means alone, but in the opening-up of trade. The *wokou* raids, he reasoned, had been caused not because the Japanese were intrinsically bloodthirsty, but because trade was a necessity and had been denied to them.

On some occasions the negotiations were strengthened by a willingness on the part of the Japanese to hand over captured wako for execution by the Chinese or Koreans as a gesture of good intent. Pirates were always expendable, particularly if they were actually non-Japanese. The most terrible account of executing pirates in this way dates from 1405. The Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimochi sent an envoy to China to present tribute and to hand over 20 pirate leaders from Iki and Tsushima as an act of goodwill. The Ming emperor was delighted at the gesture and returned the prisoners to the Japanese to demonstrate his own magnanimity and leniency. But the pirates were to receive no mercy. Instead the Japanese envoy ordered that a stove should be built with a copper steamer basket on top of it. One pirate was made to get into the basket while his comrade built up the fire. This was repeated along the line, and in this way each pirate was scalded to death, one by one – and very slowly.

Yu Dayou was the most successful Chinese general to fight the wako on the sea, although he is also famous for winning the land battle of Putoushan against them in 1553.





## THE WAKO'S EXPERIENCE OF BATTLE

Three case studies will provide illustrations of the experience of pirate battles, namely Fujiwara Sumitomo's revolt; a large-scale wako raid on China; and a smaller encounter with an English ship off Borneo.

### A domestic piracy campaign: the revolt of Fujiwara Sumitomo, 936-41

The disturbance led by Fujiwara Sumitomo in 936 was the first example in Japanese history of pirate bands combining on a grand scale under strong leadership, and the juxtaposition of his activities with a period of famine gives his 'rebellion' the air of a peasants' revolt carried out by sea. It occurred at the same time as the better-known insurrection by Taira Masakado far to the east, and the coincidence of the two events placed the government in a dilemma. In some ways Sumitomo's revolt was the more difficult of the two to handle, because it spread so widely owing to his numerous supporters.

Fujiwara Sumitomo had been born into an aristocratic family in Iyo province and was adopted by Fujiwara Yoshinori. According to later accounts he had originally been sent back to his native province with a military commission to destroy local pirates, but by 936 we read of him in command of his own *kaizoku* band. He led as many as 1,000 ships to rob and pillage, although many of his followers voluntarily surrendered when a newly appointed governor of Iyo rewarded them for renouncing piracy:

The bandits heard of his magnanimous behaviour, and over 2,500 admitted their sins and submitted to punishment. Pirate chiefs ... altogether 30 in number, folded their arms, offered lists of names and submitted. So we allotted them land, clothes, and food, granted seeds and urged them to take up agriculture.

The year 936 was a bad one for disease and famine in Japan. Many erstwhile pirates were easily persuaded to obey the law by the provision of pardons and famine relief, but more agricultural disasters followed in 938, and in 939 we find Fujiwara Sumitomo once again leading pirates.

Such was his influence that he virtually controlled the whole of the traffic on the Inland Sea. He even had supporters within the capital, and when Sumitomo was summoned to the Court to explain his behaviour his followers responded by setting fire to buildings. Fujiwara Kodaka, the vice-governor of Bizen province, learned that Sumitomo was planning to attack Kyoto, so hurried there to warn the emperor, but he and his family were intercepted en route at a post station. Sumitomo and his men loosed arrows at the vice-governor's party. Kodaka was captured and had his ears cut off and his nose slashed. His wife was abducted and his children were killed by the pirates.

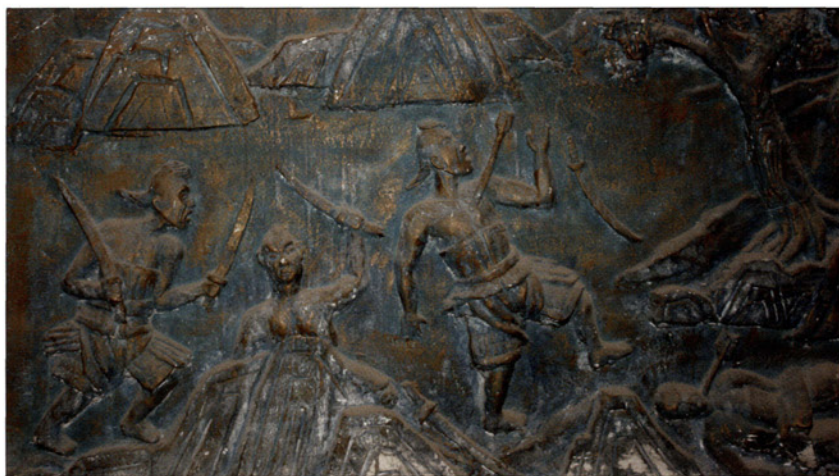


Qi Jiguang (1528-88), the most successful Chinese general to fight the wako, from a portrait in the Great Wall Museum, Huangyaguan.

A member of Qi Jiguang's mandarin duck formation at the battle of Hengyu. Hengyu Island was used as base by wako, and Qi Jiguang planned his attack according to the rise and fall of the tides. When the assault began the Chinese soldiers bought themselves extra time by placing bales of straw along the beach. This life-sized diorama is in the Dengzhou Naval Headquarters Museum, Penglai.







**In 1561 Qi Jiguang conducted a major operation against the wako in the general area of Taizhou. This bas-relief in the Dengzhou Naval Headquarters Museum, Penglai, shows the defeat of one wako band at Shanfengling.**

This was about the same time that the Court received the news of Taira Masakado's rebellion in northern Japan. Faced with insurrection on two fronts the Court placed Kyoto on full military alert, and conducted the New Year ceremonies for 940 under armed guard. Watchtowers were erected in the city. Two reliable samurai commanders were commissioned to head north, and one other, Ono Yoshifuru, was given the job of destroying Fujiwara Sumitomo. Four days after Yoshifuru left on his mission Sumitomo attacked Bitchu province.

In order to reduce the impact of war on two fronts the Court decided to try to buy time by offering Sumitomo a high court rank. This eventually worked, but the speed of communication was so slow that Sumitomo had raided Awaji Island in the meantime and his supporters had caused fires in Yamazaki, a place on the river leading down to the Inland Sea where the government had sent soldiers to defend the approach to the capital. Fires were burning in Kyoto itself when the news was finally received that Sumitomo was pleased to accept the court rank, and from then on the threat to Kyoto subsided temporarily, allowing the samurai to concentrate on Taira Masakado.

Once Masakado's head was off his shoulders the full weight of the imperial forces could be brought to bear against Sumitomo, but before they could act Sumitomo attacked Sanuki province with 400 ships. Vice-Governor Fujiwara Kunikaze fled to a secret hiding place in western Honshu. Ono Yoshifuru, assisted by Minamoto Tsunetomo, was again commissioned to deal with Sumitomo, and one allied pirate captain was captured. But the harvest in 940 had been poor; so Sumitomo led his men in a new series of raids, attacking Dazaifu in Kyushu and burning the government mint in Suo province.

In 941 Fujiwara Kunikaze emerged from his hiding place when provincial officials in Iyo presented him with the head of one of Sumitomo's pirate leaders. The newly confident Kunikaze, although outnumbered eight to one, launched an attack on Sumitomo's Iyo base at the head of 200 ships. Victory was assured when one of Sumitomo's henchmen turned traitor and disclosed the location of all his master's secret hideouts and passages through the waterways. The destruction of Sumitomo might have been complete had not rough seas prevented Fujiwara Kunikaze from sealing off all the escape routes. For three months









Sumitomo licked his wounds, and then launched a daring raid on the strategic headquarters at Dazaifu. Taira Sadamori and Fujiwara Tadafumi, who had recently vanquished Taira Masakado, were sent to Kyushu where they engaged Sumitomo in a decisive battle in Hakata Bay. There was an advance by land with support from the sea; and a fight where Sumitomo lost 800 ships and many hundreds of his pirates. When defeat appeared inevitable many of them threw themselves overboard to commit suicide.

Sumitomo escaped capture for a second time, but Japan's first pirate king had not long to live. About a month later he was captured in his native Iyo and beheaded. The samurai leaders who had destroyed him were richly rewarded. Sumitomo's severed head was displayed in Kyoto three weeks later, but so strong and extensive was his network of support that it took a further four months before the last of his followers was eliminated.

**A group of wako are led away as captives. Note how their arms are tied securely behind their backs by complex knots. The Ming soldiers are taking no chances! (From the *Wokou tujuan* scroll on display in the Coastal Defence Museum, Zhenhai, Ningbo, by kind permission)**

### **International action: Hu Dongxian and Xu Hai, 1556**

One of the largest wako operations against China was masterminded by a Chinese pirate when, in the spring and summer of 1556, the renegade

### **PLATE G: FUJIWARA SUMITOMO LEADS A PIRATE RAID, 940**

Fujiwara Sumitomo was Japan's first 'pirate king'. In this plate we see him leading a raid on Hakata Bay during his final insurrection. This particular phase of the raid is being directed against a government grain ship. The pirates operate from small boats and make use of a smoke screen provided by burning rice straw. As befits his status as a samurai, Sumitomo is wearing full *yoro*i armour, while his followers are more simply clad in *do maru* armours with small *eboshi* caps on their heads. The boatmen and the ordinary pirates wear no armour, and some have stripped to their loincloths, although all have their heads covered, probably just to keep their long hair under control. The government ship is based on the model of a contemporary vessel in the Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of History in Fukuyama, which in turn derives from a ship depicted on the Kitano Tenjin Scroll. Details of the raid come from the *Gakuonji Engi emaki*, a painted scroll of the life of Fujiwara Sumitomo, also to be found in the Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of History.





A wako is attacked by a Chinese soldier, from a wall painting in the Dengzhou Naval Headquarters Museum, Penglai.

Chinese wako leader Xu Hai led a massive raid on Zhejiang province. He was opposed and eventually defeated by a leader called Hu Dongxian, who used clever psychological tricks to overcome the wako's military superiority.

The 1556 raid was one of a number of large-scale incursions that happened as a result of China suspending formal tribute missions from Japan. Hu Dongxian knew that to defeat the wako by purely military means was well-nigh impossible, a feeling that was confirmed when the raid was revealed to be a complex operation masterminded by Wang Zhi, the 'King of the Wako' based on the Goto archipelago in Japan. Several thousand wako landed to the north of the Yangzi river while others came ashore south of the river and threatened Shanghai. A third group attacked in the Ningbo area. But these three operations were merely diversionary tactics to mask the main assault by Xu Hai against Hangzhou and Suzhou, and eventually Nanjing. Xu Hai's main body arrived in Zhapu harbour, where they destroyed their own boats as a sign that they were not going to withdraw. Some of the group laid siege to Zhapu, but many moved northwards, presumably in small boats.

Hu Dongxian thwarted one group of wako by the simple expedient of loading a boat with poisoned wine. The soldiers in charge of it fled on sighting the wako, who made merry with the wine until some died. Xu Hai then changed his plans and abandoned the siege of Zhapu. Three hard-fought battles followed

as he and his men moved inland. Xu Hai finally arrived at the walled city of Dongxiang where he believed there were plentiful supplies. The gates were firmly closed against him so he laid siege to Dongxiang using a wide range of sophisticated siege weaponry, including cannon, assault towers mounted on boats and a giant battering ram suspended in a framework. But the city wall was newly built and held out against the fierce assault, so the wako decided to starve the garrison out. Dongxiang still held out, so the frustrated pirates eventually abandoned the attempt after five miserable months. In spite of the resistance offered by Dongxiang they were well laden with plunder, which they loaded on to captured Chinese boats.

All this time Hu Dongxian had held back from attacking the wako directly, believing that he could achieve more by subtle diplomacy. Once the siege of Dongxiang was abandoned he reasoned that the wako's main concern was now how to get back to Japan with all their booty. The plunder-laden Chinese boats formed a long and vulnerable crocodile. So Hu Dongxian made the wako an offer. Those who wished to surrender would be employed within the Chinese military. Those who wished to return to





Harbour activity in the Inland Sea in times of peace, from a painting in the Noshima Murakami Navy Museum in Miyakubo.

Japan would be supplied with vessels to allow them to do so. It was a bold gamble. He knew that there had already been some disagreement among the wako leaders about what to do next, and watched while they fell out with each other. As Hu Dongxian had correctly anticipated, Xu Hai put his own interests first, and cleverly played upon the existing rivalries among his comrades to save his own skin. Many wako were slaughtered with Xu Hai's connivance as they tried to reach the ships that Hu Dongxian had provided. Having apparently aided his escape, the Chinese authorities then abandoned Xu Hai to his fate. Rival wako commanders turned against their erstwhile leader, and an internal battle began. At a crucial stage in the fight Yu Dayou joined in with his government troops and the wako army was destroyed. Xu Hai's drowned body was later found in a stream.

### **Wako on the micro-level: the *Tiger* incident, 1605**

For a wako action on the micro-level we need look no farther than English historical records, where we find a remarkable eyewitness account by an Englishman from 1605 of both the appearance and the fighting qualities of the wako. Sir Edward Michelborne was in command of the *Tiger*, and encountered a Japanese ship as it was heading back to Japan having raided China, Cambodia and finally Borneo:

About the 27th of December 1605 I met with a junk of the Japons, which had been pirating along the coast of China and Cambodia. Their pilots being dead, with ignorance and foul weather, they had cast away their ship on the shoals of the great island of Borneo, and to enter into the country of Borneo they durst not ...

The famous helmet with a sea shell badge worn by Murakami Takeyoshi, displayed in the Pirate Castle on Innoshima.









The first meeting involved the exchange of greetings, and Sir Edward was courteously invited on board. Sir Edward, who was as much of a pirate as the Japanese were, sent a party to make a full reconnaissance of the strange vessel with a view towards capturing it. As good manners between strange crews were something of a rarity, the Englishmen completely misunderstood the courteous Japanese behaviour and after their own survey they allowed a group of wako to board the *Tiger* without being disarmed. When sufficient wako were on board the Japanese struck out with their swords against the English crew. On reaching the gun room they found a certain John Davis, who soon became the first Englishman ever to be killed by a Japanese person. Sir Edward saved the day by handing pikes to his men. With these they were able to keep the sharp Japanese blades at a distance, and slowly the Englishmen drove them down into the interior of the ship. The desperate wako confined themselves in a cabin that no one dared approach, and were finally disposed of by the horrible method of firing cannon loaded with case shot and bullets into the side of the cabin at point blank range. All but one of the 22 wako were killed. The English cannon were then turned on the wako ship.



**The outer gate of the fortress of Weiyuan, built during the Ming dynasty to guard the approaches to Ningbo. It lies along the ridge overlooking the sea at Zhenhai.**

## MUSEUMS AND COLLECTIONS

There are two museums in Japan dedicated to medieval naval warfare and the *kaizoku*. The Murakami Navy Museum is to be found at Miyakubo on the island of Oshima, from where the tiny island of Noshima is visible. Its collection is very good and well displayed, and there is an excellent reference library. Further island hopping takes one to Innoshima, where a museum dedicated to the other Murakami branch is to be found in a mock Japanese castle called the Innoshima Pirate Castle. Inside is a very good collection of materials and some striking waxworks. At Shirahama in Wakayama prefecture the pirate cave of the Kumano navy may be visited

### **PLATE H: A MULTINATIONAL BAND OF WAKO MOCK THE GODDESS OF THE SEA, 1567**

The pirates of the Far East had no respect for culture or religion, nor any fear of the gods that religions presented. Many seafarers in China placed their trust in the assurance of safety provided by the goddess Mazu (in Japanese Maso). Here we see a multinational gang of wako mocking an image of Mazu in a shrine of hers that they are in the process of raiding on the Chinese coast. Mazu, also known as the 'Heavenly Empress Mother', was originally the object of popular worship in Fujian province in the Song dynasty. During the Ming dynasty the veneration of Mazu spread through international trade to Taiwan, Japan, Korea and South East Asia. She is seated in the centre of the rear of the hall, and is accompanied by numerous other deities, including the carved wooden demons who stand before her. These demons, tamed by Mazu, have become benevolent beings whose very names – literally 'the eyes that see a thousand leagues' and 'the ears that hear through the winds' – convey their powers. The wako, who are dressed according to their depictions on the *Wokou tujuan* scroll at Ningbo, mock what they will later destroy. Note the votive offering thrown on to the floor. It is a painting on wood thanking Mazu for saving men who have been shipwrecked. The details of the shrine building are based on Mazu shrines in Penglai and Yantai, while the images and the votive offering come from a shrine exhibited in 2006 at the Kyushu National Museum.



Qi Jiguang defends Dengzhou (Penglai) from its fortified harbour. In the background we see the walls of the complex now called the Penglai Pavilion that overlooks the port. This life-sized diorama is in the Dengzhou Naval Headquarters Museum, Penglai.



at the foot of the towering Sandanbeki cliffs. It is reached by going down in a lift, and is great fun. The Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of History in Fukuyama has excellent displays about seafaring in the Inland Sea, including model ships and a Murakami flag. It also owns a painted scroll depicting Fujiwara Sumitomo, which is displayed from time to time.

As for collections devoted to the wako, the impression is that they are regarded as something of an embarrassment in modern Japan. The lavish Kyushu National Museum in Dazaifu, opened as recently as 2005, contains no mention of the wako in its superbly displayed galleries devoted to relations between Japan and East Asia. Nor is there anything to be seen on Tsushima or Okinawa. Only the museum in Gonoura on the island of Iki covers the wako at all, displaying coins and other objects, yet on the remote Goto island of Fukue may be found a bizarre statue of two wako.

The defeat of the wako at Chinese hands is well illustrated in China. One showcase in the National Military Museum in Beijing is devoted to the campaigns against wako raids on China, and has a portrait of Yu Dayou, but better displays are to be found near to the places where the wako raided. At Zhenhai, on the sea coast near Ningbo, is the Coastal Defence Museum, which has a room devoted to wako raids with the illustrated scroll, models and statues. At Penglai in Shandong, where the Ming fortified harbour is being restored, one can visit the former home of Qi Jiguang and enjoy the life-sized dioramas of battles against the wako in the Dengzhou Naval Headquarters Museum. Much material relating to the Korean navy may be found in the War Memorial Museum in Seoul, including a painting of the Korean raid on Tsushima.

## FURTHER READING

A very good summary of the history of the wako may be found in Volume IV of *The Cambridge History of Japan* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991), with further accounts in *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988), especially Volume VII (*The Ming Dynasty Part 1*) pp. 490–505. The standard work on Japanese piracy against the Ming is Kwan-wai So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China during the 16th Century* (Michigan 1975). Detailed descriptions of the appearance and tactics of the wako are in Joshua A. Fogel, *Sagacious Monks and Bloodthirsty Warriors: Chinese Views of Japan in the Ming-Qing Period* (Norwalk



CT 2002), from which many of my quotations come. Thomas Nelson's 'Slavery in Medieval Japan', *Monumenta Nipponica* 59 (2005) pp. 463–91, deals with this sensitive subject.

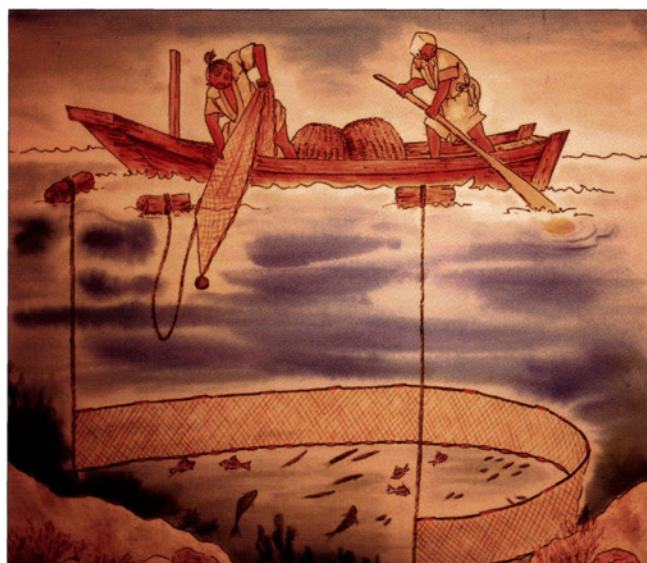
The authority on the wako raids on Korea is Benjamin Hazard, who has produced several articles, including 'The Formative Years of the Wako 1223–63', *Monumenta Nipponica* 22 (1967) pp. 260–77, and the entry on wako in the *Encyclopaedia of Japan*. Hazard's article 'The Creation of the Korean Navy during the Koryo Period', *Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 48 (1973) pp. 10–23, has details of pirate raids on Japan.

The Japanese point of view (coloured by 1930s nationalism) is provided in English by Yosaburo Takegoshi in *The Story of the Wako: Japanese Pioneers in the Southern Region* (Tokyo 1940). Fujiwara Sumitomo's revolt is found in Wayne Farris, *Heavenly Warriors* (Harvard 1992). The key article in English on the Murakami navy is Peter D. Shapinsky, 'Japanese Pirates and Sea Tenure in the Sixteenth Century Seto Inland Sea: A Case Study of the Murakami Kaizoku', a paper presented at Seascapes, a conference held in 2003. The text is available on the internet. Chinese naval activity is related in Lo Jung-pan, 'The Emergence of China as a Sea Power in the Late Sung and Early Yuan Periods', *Far Eastern Quarterly* 14 (1955) pp. 489–503. The use made by the Yuan dynasty of Chinese pirates is related in Tien Ju-Kang, 'Mongol Rulers and Chinese Pirates', *History Today* (September 1983) pp. 33–38. A full account of the pacification of Xu Hai appears in Frank A. Kierman and John Fairbank, *Chinese Ways in Warfare* (Harvard 1974). The story of the English encounter with the wako is told in full in Cyril Wild (ed.), *Purchas His Pilgrimes in Japan* (London 1938), a series of extracts referring to Japan from the original *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes; Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and others By Samuel Purchas BD*. Piracy in the Ryukyus is covered briefly in George H. Kerr, *Okinawa: The History of an Island People* (revised edition, Vermont 2000), and in Thomas Nelson, 'Japan in the Life of Early Ryukyu', *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 32 (2006) pp. 367–92. There are two recently published Japanese works on the Murakami navy: *Sengoku Suigun to Murakami Ichizoku* (Tokyo 2005) and *Kaizoku no Shima* (Tokyo 2002). The career of Qi Jiguang is covered in Ray Huang, *1587: A Year of No Significance* (Yale 1981). For more on ships and their armaments see my books in Osprey's New Vanguard series concerned with Fighting Ships of the Far East and Siege Weapons of the Far East.



**Blacksmiths in action in one of the settlements that made up the domain of the Murakami family of Noshima, from a painting from the Noshima Murakami Navy Museum in Miyakubo.**

**Fishing, a peaceful activity of the Murakami followers, from a painting in the Noshima Murakami Navy Museum in Miyakubo.**





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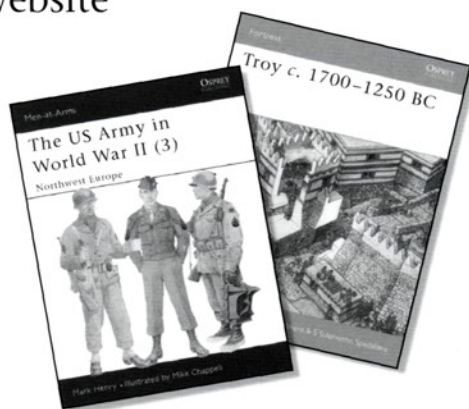


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